

# **Reading literature in urban English classrooms**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis presents an argument for a reconceptualisation of how literature is read in secondary urban English classrooms and of what is accomplished through the activities of reading.

In the discourse of policy and in theorised accounts of practice, the reading that is undertaken in classrooms has tended to be construed as either a poor substitute or merely a preparation for other reading, particularly for that paradigmatic literacy event, the absorbed and simultaneously discriminating consumption of the literary text by the independent, private reader.

This thesis argues for a broader – historically, ethnographically, psychologically and theoretically informed – understanding of what constitutes reading, for a fully social conception of the sign and of sign-making and for a social model of learning.

It draws on data gathered through classroom observation and digital videotape of English lessons taught over the course of a year by two teachers in a secondary comprehensive school in East London. It situates such data, and the interpretation of such data, in culture and history, in the culture and history of the researcher as well as of the participants in the research, school students and their teachers.

Attention is paid to the pedagogy of the two teachers, to the constraints that operate on them and to the choices that they make. The thesis presents an interpretation of school students' engagement with literary texts as an active, collaborative process of meaning-making. Literature, instantiated in multiple forms in these classrooms, functions not as a valorised heritage to be transmitted so much as a resource for the students' work of cultural production and contestation.

I hereby declare that except where explicit attribution is made, the work presented in this thesis is entirely my own.

Word count (exclusive of appendices and bibliography): 93 968 words.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'J. G. J.', with a stylized, cursive script.

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### The Doubter

Whenever we seemed  
To have found the answer to a question  
One of us untied the string of the old rolled-up  
Chinese scroll on the wall, so that it fell down and  
Revealed to us the man on the bench who  
Doubted so much.

I, he said to us,  
Am the doubter. I am doubtful whether  
The work was well done that devoured your days.  
Whether what you said would still have value for anyone if it were less well  
said.  
Whether you said it well but perhaps  
Were not convinced of the truth of what you said.  
Whether it is not ambiguous; each possible misunderstanding  
Is your responsibility. Or it can be unambiguous  
And take the contradictions out of things; is it too unambiguous?  
If so, what you say is useless. Your thing has no life in it.  
Are you truly in the stream of happening? Do you accept  
All that develops? Are *you* developing? Who are you? To whom  
Do you speak? Who finds what you say useful? And, by the way:  
Is it sobering? Can it be read in the morning?  
Is it also linked to what is already there? Are the sentences that were  
Spoken before you made use of, or at least refuted? Is everything verifiable?  
By experience? By which one? But above all  
Always above all else: how does one act  
If one believes what you say? Above all: how does one act?

Reflectively, curiously, we studied the doubting  
Blue man on the scroll, looked at each other and  
Made a fresh start.

**Bertolt Brecht (1987: 270-271)**

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

In this opening chapter, I want to set out the parameters of my research. I will indicate something of the history of my interest in the subject, the theoretical and empirical fields on which I focus and the claims that I make about the scope and significance of my research.

The main research question that I attempt to address is:

**How are literary texts read in secondary English classrooms in an urban school?**

It might be helpful to begin by clarifying the terms of my research interest. I use 'urban' as shorthand for a series of interlocking characteristics of schools in inner-city areas: among these characteristics I would want to foreground their comprehensive (non-selective) intake; the multicultural, multilingual student population; the predominance of children from working class families; high levels of poverty (see also Anderson and Summerfield 2004; Hill 2004; Kress *et al.* 2005). I will say more below about what I take to be the significance of these characteristics.

In choosing to focus attention on the reading of 'literary texts' I do not intend to signal that I regard the category of the literary, or literature, as unproblematic: what constitutes the text, and how it might be thus constituted, are questions that will continue to exercise me as I analyse the empirical data emerging out of classroom observation. Though the last decade has seen a significant shift in emphasis in the versions of English that are instantiated in

secondary classrooms in this country, it nevertheless remains the case that literature occupies a central place within the secondary English curriculum. Thus, to some extent, my interest is in the reading of literary texts because those are the texts most widely and most often read within the secondary English classroom. Part of my argument, though, is that literary texts are read in these classrooms in ways that open up distinct possibilities for the readers – possibilities of learning and development, possibilities of social semiotic work. The argument is not, however, that these possibilities are inherent in the texts themselves – in their literary qualities, say – but rather that the possibilities arise out of the kinds of engagement with the text, out of ways of reading that are deeply historied.

To suggest that these ways of reading might be construed as something that is a 'literacy practice' (or even an ensemble of literacy practices) is, in part, to acknowledge that what I describe is susceptible to a kind of ethnographic analysis: it is to make the claim that there are regularities in the phenomena that I observe, and that these regularities amount to an identifiable practice (or set of practices) involving a group of participants (students and teachers). Implicit in this claim is another, more fundamental, one, that there are different ways of reading, different ways of doing things with texts: that, in other words, there is not a single, universal form of literacy but rather a variety of different, and differently situated, literacy practices.

### 1.1 The autobiography of the question

My interest in reading, or rather readings, predates my experience of London classrooms. In what really does seem like a former life, I spent several years puzzling about the audiences that populated the London theatres in the years leading up to the English Revolution. These audiences were constituted in difference; they were representative, particularly in the 'public', open theatres such as the Globe, of a broad cross-section of the population of London; they were sophisticated, knowing consumers of the multimodal texts that were performed for their benefit (and the sharers' profit). A play like John Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, a self-conscious reworking of *Romeo and Juliet* in which the lovers are reconfigured as brother and sister, depends for its effect on the existence of an audience that recognises it as such – an audience that is capable of reading its representation of incest within the context of an established theatrical tradition – not a canon, but certainly a repertoire of familiar dramatic texts. The extent to which the experience of theatre had become, as it were, both common culture and common representational currency can be gauged, with the closure of the theatres in 1642 and the removal of close state censorship of the printing presses, by the astonishing frequency with which theatre reappears as a structuring metaphor in the political and religious pamphlets of the 1640s (Heinemann 1984, Butler 1984, Gurr 1987).

I was interested, then, in the theatres of early seventeenth-century London as social semiotic spaces, as places of cultural and political activity and transformation. I wanted to understand more about the relationship between

the worlds represented by the plays (particularly the city comedies of Jonson, Dekker, Middleton and Brome) and the lifeworlds of their audiences. So what seemed important to me was less the texts in and of themselves than the effect that the texts (in performance) had on their audiences – and what their audiences made of them.

When, in the mid-1980s, I started work as a teacher in an inner London school, it was the unmissable fact of the diversity of the student body that interested me – and it was precisely this diversity which refocused my earlier preoccupation with the meanings that readers (or audiences) make of texts. In the multicultural environment of a London classroom, the consideration of what readers bring to texts, of the interface between textual and extratextual reality, and of the complex play of intertextuality, was no longer a fraught and frustrating exercise in theatrical archaeology but rather an everyday part of teaching and learning (Burgess 1984, 1988; Burgess and Hardcastle 1991). One of my first experiences as a newly-qualified teacher, working at a boys' school in East London, was of teaching a unit of work on storytelling to a class of 30 twelve- and thirteen-year-old students, all but two of whom were of Bangladeshi heritage. Underprepared and casting around for a story to tell, I chose *King Lear*. I had got no further than 'Once there was an old king who had three daughters' when I was interrupted. 'We know this story,' the boys informed me, as one, 'it's Bengali.' Graciously, they allowed me to continue, only occasionally pointing out where I had got my facts wrong.



Throughout the twenty years I spent as a teacher in inner London secondary schools, I continued to be fascinated by the ways in which students would illuminate and make sense of the literature that they encountered in the classroom, making meanings that were informed by their subjectivities, lives, cultures and histories. For the young women of Turkish and Kurdish heritage with whom I read *Romeo and Juliet* at a school in Hackney, East London, Juliet's attempts to negotiate the contradictions in her relationships with her family and her lover were often all too recognisable, all too close to their own lifeworlds (Yandell 1995). In other cases, with other texts, the correspondences were less obvious, less direct: I have written elsewhere about teaching *The Merchant of Venice* in the same Hackney school, and about one student in particular, Hong Hai, whose writing in role as Shylock, reflecting on his daughter's elopement with a Christian, seemed to me to be simultaneously drawing on her own experiences to shed light on the Shakespearean character and using the distancing perspective of the role to explore her own feelings, her complex cultural positioning (Yandell 1997a).

As a PGCE student, I had encountered the Bullock Report's exhortation regarding the relationship between schools and their communities, between students' identities in school and in the outside world, between the learning that happens within and beyond the school gates (DES 1975, and see below, chapter 6). At the time, I had welcomed this commitment to a principle, a view of the place of schooling in the wider society that I shared, and the report's attempt to address questions of what would constitute appropriate provision for 'Children from Families of Overseas Origin' (DES 1975, chapter

20). Almost at the same time as I started teaching, however, a very different conception of the relationship of the curriculum to the cultures of school students was being articulated. It was expressed most clearly in the consultation document that preceded the imposition of the National Curriculum in England and Wales, which announced that the national curriculum was intended to ensure:

that all pupils, regardless of sex, ethnic origin and geographical location, have access to broadly the same good and relevant curriculum and programmes of study.  
(DES 1987: 4)

In this paradigm, the school curriculum, detailed in the programmes of study, derives its validity not from its responsiveness to local interests but from its universality. And, if the curriculum is to be 'broadly the same', little space is left for any serious attention to be paid to what Bullock termed 'the language and culture of the home.' The key word here is 'regardless': local differences – of gender, history, culture – are to be disregarded. Equality of opportunity is to be delivered through access to a homogenous, preformed entity, the already-specified curriculum.

The centralised model of the curriculum, promoted by the 1987 consultation document and by the earlier HMI *Curriculum Matters* publications (DES 1984), has maintained a hegemonic position in policy throughout the following two decades, and has been a vital constituent in the Standards agenda in education throughout that time (Jones, 1989, 2003, Hatcher and Jones 1996, Lawton and Chitty 1988, Apple 1996, 2001, 2004, Plaskow

2004, Barber 1996). It continues to underpin more recent policy pronouncements around the theme of 'personalisation', to the extent that personalisation has been carefully defined as a set of increasingly individualised interventions to ensure access to the same pre-specified curricular goals:

We now know that to maximise the learning for each individual, we must first measure the level of progress that the student has reached (which is called 'assessment for learning'); we must then plan and deliver the learning necessary to enable the pupil to advance to the next level of progress (which is called 'personalised learning'). The development of such a customised or child-centred approach to teaching and learning is not some new-age obsession with making students feel good, or any rejection of the importance of formal teaching, or a drift from discipline-based curriculum: it is the internationally proven research-based strategy for improving learning and raising attainment at individual, school and national level.

(Boston 2007)

Implicit in the 1987 consultation document's notion of 'access' is a particular pedagogy, one that was rendered more explicit in the increasingly frequent appearance of the phrase 'pupils should be taught to ...' in subsequent versions of the National Curriculum (DES/Welsh Office 1990, DFE/Welsh Office 1995, DfEE 1999).<sup>1</sup> The assumption is that what is learnt is equivalent to what is taught, that knowledge can be transmitted, and that, in effect, a curriculum can be delivered (like a sack of potatoes). Ken Boston's view of personalised learning emphasises important elements of continuity with what has gone before. Learning remains, in his presentation, linear, measurable and the property of the individual learner. His version of teaching might be more fine-grained than the versions on which early

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<sup>1</sup> In the most recent version of the National Curriculum, there is a welcome return to the more open, and learner-focused, stem, 'Pupils should be able to ...'. See <[http://www.qca.org.uk/qca\\_12195.aspx](http://www.qca.org.uk/qca_12195.aspx)>, accessed 17 August 2007.

incarnations of the National Curriculum were premised; it is, nonetheless, a deeply technicist approach to pedagogy.

Moreover, when Boston is at pains to define what his (official) version of personalisation is not, it seems to me that all the strands that he caricatures and then rejects are aspects of practice that need to be taken seriously. I might not be committed to 'new-age obsession with making students feel good,' but I worry about approaches to teaching and learning that fail to take sufficient account of the subjectivities of the learner, that fail, therefore, to conceptualise teaching and learning as relational, socioculturally situated practices. Likewise, though I am not sure exactly what Boston means by the 'rejection of the importance of formal teaching,' I want to explore approaches to pedagogy that are more conscious of the agency of the learners. And if Boston wants to allay fears that what is on offer is a 'drift from discipline-based curriculum,' I want to suggest that there is a pressing need to look closely (and critically) at the ways in which the current discipline-based curriculum is negotiated and instantiated in the urban classroom.

Part of what seems to me deeply problematic about curriculum policy post-Bullock is that it does not reflect my experience in the (multicultural, urban) classroom. What attracted me, more than twenty years ago, to Bullock's advice that students should not be 'expected to cast off the language and culture of the home' was that it gestured at a more inclusive, pluralist conception of schooling. In other words, my initial reaction was an ideological one, supportive of what appeared to me to be a move in the direction of a

more socially just education system. What I did not appreciate then, I think, was the force of Bullock's words in relation to pedagogy: students do not simply cast off their out-of-school identities and histories as they enter the classroom. I make this claim on the basis of experience, but also because of what seem to me to be centrally important philosophical arguments about the resources that people use to make sense of things; these arguments, traceable to the Bakhtin/Vološinov circle of cultural and linguistic theorists, insist that the act of interpretation is never abstract but must always, necessarily, stand in a specific historical relationship to the text. I develop this point in chapters two and three (below). The question is, therefore, what opportunities there are for students to draw on these cultural resources in their learning within the classroom? The danger of that one word, 'regardless,' deployed in 1987 in the preparation for the National Curriculum and since reiterated in hundreds of school mission statements, is that it encourages an approach to curriculum and pedagogy that is inattentive to such cultural resources.

My interest in the relationship between the practices that I seek to describe and theorise and the discourse of policy is reflected in my first subsidiary research question:

**How does such reading relate to, or conflict with, the dominant, policy-approved paradigm of reading?**

Earlier I referred to the ways in which London school students read (and responded to) *King Lear*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Merchant of Venice*. It is because of such experiences that I want to argue for the importance of

approaches to curriculum and pedagogy, specifically within the field of English, that are properly attentive to the cultural resources that students bring with them to the classroom. I want to argue for a conception of the classroom as a dialogic, multi-accented space, within which the activity of reading literature is not neatly separable from a complex web of sociocultural relationships, not separable from issues of power and the contestation of power. And I want to argue for a conceptualisation of the activity of reading as fully, irreducibly social.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, the position that I seek to occupy and defend is not in any simple sense the product of experience. Experience – the twenty years I have spent as a classroom teacher in London schools, or the time that I now spend visiting my PGCE students as they begin to grapple with the complexities of urban classrooms – might be a great teacher, but what it teaches depends on how it is framed, on the theoretical and political lenses through which it is viewed. I have indicated, above, a commitment to social justice – a commitment that preceded and partly motivated my move into teaching in London – as well as a prior interest in reading positions and in approaches to reading that tend to destabilise the text. Such interests and commitments were nourished, deepened and concretised by my experience as a teacher and as an active trade unionist, by my participation over two decades in the work of the National Union of Teachers, by my involvement in a series of campaigns on educational questions, by my editorship, for much of this time,

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<sup>2</sup> My sense of the shape of this argument, of the ways in which encounters with literature in urban classrooms might be theorised, was sharpened by the research I conducted into my own practice and that of my colleagues in the English department at Kingsland School, Hackney. This TTA-sponsored research, conducted in the mid-1990s, was published in two articles in *Changing English* (Yandell 1997a and 1997b).

of *Socialist Teacher*, the journal of the Socialist Teachers' Alliance. My analysis, then, comes from a particular perspective.

When I was in my PGCE year, I also read Shirley Brice Heath's *Ways with Words* (1983). Its careful analysis of the diversity of literacy practices within distinct communities helped me to look at literacy differently in the classrooms where I worked. It provided me with an alternative to the model of a single, universal, linear scale of literacy development, the model which has had, within the past two or three decades, hegemonic status within public and policy discourse around the field of literacy. When, in the mid-1990s, I was awarded a TTA (Teacher Training Agency) grant to carry out research into the teaching of Shakespeare within my own English department, Brice Heath's ethnographic work provided a theoretical basis, or at least a point of entry, for my initial exploration of different practices and different ways of reading (Yandell 1997a and 1997b). I explore Brice Heath's work in more detail below (chapter 3.3).

## 1.2 The theoretical field

My interest in the ways in which literary texts are read in the urban classroom places my work at the intersection of three separable but related theoretical fields. I draw upon work in these fields in order to address my second subsidiary research question:

### **How can such reading be described and theorised?**

The first field is sometimes referred to as the New Literacy Studies.

Investigating the plurality of (local, domain-specific) literacies, its practitioners

have tended to focus on sites outside mainstream schooling; often, indeed, the literacies explored have been explicitly counterposed to the paradigm of mainstream/dominant/schooled literacy (Street 1984, 1995, 2001, Boyarin 1993, Cope and Kalantzis 2000, Prinsloo and Breier 1996, Baynham 1995, Gee 1996, 2004, Barton and Hamilton 1998, Barton et al 2000, Gregory 1996, 2004, Gregory and Williams 2000). The insights derived from these studies, their insistence on the situated – and ideological – nature of all literacies, together with their use of ethnographic approaches, inform the approach I have taken to my research and provided me with a fresh way of thinking about literacy practices in the classroom.

More recently, there has been a particularly significant development from literacy studies, a broadening of focus to include a much wider range of semiotic practices. Gunther Kress and others have developed multimodal social semiotics both as a theory of semiotic activity and also as, in effect, a research methodology. Unlike most researchers associated with the New Literacy Studies, Kress and his collaborators have focused attention on schools and classrooms as sites of semiotic activity, though largely concentrating on the role of the teacher (Kress 1997, 2003, Kress and Van Leeuwen 2000, Kress et al. 2001, 2005). My research makes use of multimodality as a research tool, but devotes as much attention to the activity of the school students as it does to the teachers involved.

The second theoretical strand of my analysis, as indicated above, draws on aspects of literary and broader semiotic theory. Any account of the



developments over the past century must, necessarily, greatly simplify the bewildering variety of strands that have emerged. For my purposes here, however, it is important to note that the dominant trajectory of literary theory since New Criticism has been away from the model of the text as stable, isolable, knowable and the proper object of critical attention and towards an emphasis on the role of the reader. To a greater or lesser degree, reader-response, post-structuralist and post-colonialist schools have all tended to focus on readers, and reading positions, through which texts may be (re-)/(de-)/constructed. Whereas in an earlier dispensation the place of literature in the curriculum might be construed as reading the great tradition, these theoretical movements allow for the possibility of disruption, of re-reading, and of a plurality of readings. These ideas, together with those on literacy/literacies that are derived from the New Literacy Studies, are developed further in chapter 3.

A separable strand within this field is that of social semiotics. There is not, historically, any sharp divide between this and the terrain of literary theory. The latter has borrowed heavily from linguistics and from other disciplines (such as psychology and anthropology), while Bakhtin, whose work is of particular significance in what follows, moved between literary and more general semiotic analysis and theory. Bakhtin and Vološinov's insistence on the contested, dialogic, multiaccented and irreducibly historical nature of the sign, which marks a radical departure from the Saussurean model of language as abstract system, provides part of the theoretical framework

within which my analysis of classroom interaction is conducted. Theories of the sign are addressed in the first part of chapter 2.

In the second part of chapter 2, I address the third, interlocking, theoretical field, that of Vygotskian psychology. In addressing the question of how and why literary texts are read in the urban classroom, I am interested not merely in the semiotic work that is done in the classroom but also in the effects of this work: in other words, I am interested in the learning and development that happen. What Vygotskian psychology provides is a fully sociocultural model that situates learning in the social interactions between people, not merely in the mind of the learner. To the extent that Vygotsky emphasises the crucial significance of the semiotic in the processes of learning, there are clear points of contact between this theoretical field and that of social semiotics; to the extent that Vygotsky emphasises the dialectical relationship between everyday and scientific concepts, there is a connection, too, between this field and literary theory's interest in what readers bring to the texts that they read. These emphases come together in Vygotsky's picture of development, a picture in which the concept of the evolution of word meaning, of the sign, is critically important.

### 1.3 The empirical field

To explore my research question(s) empirically, I collected data from two English classes, taught by two different teachers, in a mixed secondary comprehensive school in the East End of London. The data, collected

between April 2005 and July 2006, consist of lesson observations (just under forty one-hour lessons, 27 of which were videotaped), together with samples of students' written work, interviews with groups of students and with the teachers. I discuss methodological questions in detail in the fourth chapter. Here, though, it might be helpful to provide a theoretical frame for the empirical research.

At best, my data offer snapshots at a particular moment in development. To state this is also to suggest that the snapshots need to be read, to be interpreted: their meaning is not fixed, but depends, significantly, on the interests of the observer/interpreter. I am conscious, too, that, when I return to the data, my interpretation changes as my interests shift and develop. Researchers, like other readers, do not read the same text twice: each reading is historically situated, historically determined.

I should also make it clear that the data were collected in a school that I already knew well, that the classes were taught by teachers whom I already knew, a former colleague and a former student. I explore the complexities of these relationships, and of the impact of these pre-existing relationships on my role as a researcher, in my methodology chapter (below, chapter 4). For now, though, I should make it clear that the research was situated in particular ways, in a particular nexus of relationships and identities.

Weis and Fine (2004) write of their commitment as researchers to documenting 'those spaces, relations, and/or practices in which possibility flourishes':

Our commitment to revealing sites for possibility derives not only from a theoretical desire to re-view 'what is' and 'what could be,' but also from an ethical belief that critical researchers have an obligation not simply to dislodge the dominant discourse, but to help readers and audiences imagine where the spaces for resistance, agency, and possibility lie.

(Weis and Fine 2004: xxi)

It is, precisely, this sense of 'revealing sites for possibility' that motivated my choice of empirical site for my data collection. Through the description and analysis of the lessons which I observed, and of some of the work that was produced in the context of these lessons, I want to address my third and fourth subsidiary research questions:

**What pedagogy is implicated in these reading practices?  
What kinds of learning are accomplished in and through  
engagement with literary texts in these classrooms?**

#### 1.4 Scope and significance of the research

Implicit in what I have written thus far is the claim that there are, in the urban English classrooms that I have observed, literacy practices and pedagogic practices – the two categories are, to a very large degree, overlapping – that:

- (a) have not been adequately described or theorised; and
- (b) merit this attention, because of what they reveal about the possibilities of learning and engagement with literature; and
- (c) are, in significant ways, at odds with the dominant discourses of policy in this area of curriculum and pedagogy. Within these discourses, the

collaborative reading of literature in the classroom still tends to be represented as either a poor substitute for authentic – silent, individual – reading or a preparation for it, rather than as a different literacy practice, valuable in itself.

One of the very few recent, fairly large-scale, research-based inquiries into English in urban classrooms acknowledges the dearth of research in the field, particularly in comparison with the amount of attention that has been paid to literacy practices in informal, home or community, settings (Kress *et al.* 2005: 117). My research attempts to begin to rectify this deficiency by addressing the following research questions:

**How are literary texts read in secondary English classrooms in an urban school?**

1. How does such reading relate to, or conflict with, the dominant, policy-approved paradigm of reading?
2. How can such reading be described and theorised?
3. What pedagogy is implicated in these reading practices?
4. What kinds of learning are accomplished in and through engagement with literary texts in these classrooms?

In considering the theoretical lenses through which the classroom observation and analysis might be conducted, the central question is: what perspectives are necessary to provide an adequate account of what is being observed? The decision to situate the research at the intersection of literary theory, Vygotskian sociocultural psychology and ethnographically-informed literacy studies is a response to this question, since all three fields provide

important insights. The task, therefore, is to attempt an analysis that manages to synthesise these perspectives.

Chapters 5-11 are devoted to the presentation and discussion of my data. These chapters are organised, to a large extent, around individual observed lessons, or sequences of lessons, which exemplify particular aspects of classroom engagement with literary texts.

Chapter 5 focuses on Monica's class, then in Year 8, working on *Julius Caesar*. Through observation data derived from a single lesson, I explore how literacy is constituted in the classroom, and how Bakhtinian and Vygotskian theories of the social can enable us to make sense of these literacy events.

Chapters 6 and 7, both of which focus on lessons involving Neville's Year 10 class, examine the relationship between texts, teachers and school students. Attention is directed towards the concept of 'multicultural literature', in policy and in practice, and towards the significance of the students' reading positions.

Chapters 8 and 9 develop the multimodal social semiotic analysis of classroom-based literacy practices. Chapter 8 focuses particularly on the physical instantiation of such practices and makes an argument for the need to attend to the embodied quality of students' engagement with the text. In

chapter 9, observational data from different lessons is brought together in an exploration of social learning over time.

Chapters 10 and 11 draw on different kinds of data, principally students' written work, both on paper and on screen, as evidence of their learning. These chapters also begin to problematise the assessment of students' reading and the assumptions which underpin the dominant, externally-imposed, forms of assessment.

The final chapter draws together the analysis conducted through chapters 5-11. It focuses on two strands that emerge in the course of the analysis of moments of classroom engagement with literature. The first of these, returning to the contested Vygotskian concept of the Zone of Proximal Development, explores the significance of play, and particularly role-play, in these moments. The second concerns the methodological value of re-reading.

## Chapter 2

### Social theories of the sign and of learning

In this chapter, I attempt to provide a theoretical foundation for the exploration of the reading of literary texts. I address two questions:

- (i) What theory of the sign might be helpful in understanding what is involved in reading in the classroom?
- (ii) What theory of learning might be similarly helpful?

That these questions are in any sense separable, or even that they might seem so, is a product of the disciplinary specialisation that occurred across the twentieth century. Earlier Enlightenment interest in epistemological questions recognised no such disciplinary boundaries. As Hans Aarsleff has argued, for philosophers from Locke onwards:

The progress of the mind becomes a question of the progress of language. The history of thought – in the characteristic, 18th century sense – can be pursued in the origin of language.

(Aarsleff 1982: 109)

Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690/2004), devoting an entire book to 'language and words in general', 'placed the problem of language at the center of his epistemology' (Aarsleff 1982: 284). What Locke had to say about language is worth attending to. He recognised the complexity of the relationship between words and thoughts, and the developmental significance of that relationship. Thus, for example, he acknowledges that abstract concepts ('compound ideas', in his terms) are often first encountered as mere words, only later to be filled out with meaning.



And he notes the imperfection, the sheer slipperiness of both words and ideas:

Hence it comes to pass, that men's names, of very compound ideas, such as for the most part are moral words, have seldom, in two different men, the same precise signification, since one man's complex idea seldom agrees with another's, and often differs from his own, from that which he had yesterday, or will have to-morrow.

(Locke 1690/2004: 426)

Locke places language within the broader frame of the semiotic. These ideas were developed further by, among others, Condillac (1798/2001), who wrote persuasively about the origins of language in gesture, about the complex interaction between cognitive and linguistic development and about the shaping influence of context on both:

In our examination of the progress of languages, we have seen that usage fixes the meaning of words only by means of the circumstances in which we speak ...

(Condillac 1798/2001: 200)

What was central to both Locke and Condillac's picture of humanity was the commitment to an idea of semiotically-mediated development.<sup>1</sup>

## 2.1. Towards a theory of the sign

In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels, inheritors of the Enlightenment legacy of Locke and Condillac, make a series of claims about language and consciousness:

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<sup>1</sup> The role of language in development is perhaps not quite sufficiently acknowledged in Roy Porter's summary of Locke's pivotal contribution to Enlightenment thought; but what Porter does capture, wonderfully well, is the Lockean commitment to the process of education and hence to the idea of human progress. See Porter (2000: 60-71).

Language is as old as consciousness, language *is* practical consciousness that exists also for other men, and for that reason alone it really exists for me personally as well; language, like consciousness, only arises from the need, the necessity of intercourse with other men. ... Consciousness is, therefore, from the very beginning a social product, and remains so as long as men exist at all.

(Marx and Engels 1970: 51, emphasis in the original)

The first claim is that language and consciousness (or thought) are inextricably linked; the second, and perhaps more challenging, claim is that both language and consciousness have their origins in the social, in the interaction between people. The third claim, conveyed here in the phrase 'social product' and explored more fully elsewhere in *The German Ideology*, is that both language and consciousness (or rather, given the claim that 'language *is* practical consciousness', language-and-consciousness) are *produced*, that they are products of work or activity – and thus that they cannot be seen outside history. These claims, of course, have a history (gestured at above and explored more fully in Aarsleff 1982, 1983; Van der Veer and Valsiner 1991; Hardcastle 2009); they have also been generative of subsequent theoretical work, and it is to some of this work that I now turn.

The first substantial attempt to flesh out a Marxist theory of the sign was Vološinov's *Marxism and the philosophy of language* (1929/1986).<sup>2</sup>

Saussurean linguistics, which quickly became established as the dominant approach to the study of language, sought to focus attention on language structure and system (de Saussure 1915/1986: 9, 77). Vološinov, writing in

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<sup>2</sup> I refer to Vološinov as the author for ease of reference: the works which I cite are published in his name. I am aware of the controversy over the attribution of authorship (see Vološinov 1929/1986, translator's preface; Vološinov 1927/1976, translator's introduction; Todorov 1984; Brandist 2002); I remain unconvinced of the importance of the ascription of individual authorship, particularly to work produced in a period such as the 1920s in the Soviet Union.

polemical opposition to the abstractions of Saussurean linguistics, insisted on an attentiveness to language in use:

Every sign, as we know, is a construct between socially organized persons in the process of their interaction. Therefore, the forms of signs are conditioned above all by the social organization of the participants involved and also by the immediate conditions of their interaction. When these forms change, so does the sign. And it should be one of the tasks of the study of ideologies to trace this social life of the verbal sign.

(Vološinov 1929/1986: 21).

As Lecerle has observed, the break with Saussure entails a conception of language not as a structure but as a process, a 'system of variations' (Lecerle 2005: 11). It is worth noting, too, Vološinov's emphasis on the sign as a construct – as something that is made (and remade) in social interaction. For Vološinov, it is not simply that there is a problem with any theory of the sign, such as Saussure's, that tends to abstract the sign from the concrete particulars of the social interaction in which the sign is used; it is that there is a problem with the concept of *sign use* itself. Vološinov makes a clear distinction between signs and signals: only the latter, a much more limited category, have stability, fixity; signs, on the other hand, are unstable, 'always changeable and adaptable' (*ibid.* 68). Where this distinction really matters is in its implications for the role of the listener or reader. Confronted with a fixed signal, the receiver merely has the task of recognising, or failing to recognise, the signal; but the listener has a much more active, agentic role in relation to the sign – the task of 'understanding it in a particular, concrete context, ... understanding its meaning in a particular utterance, ... understanding its novelty and ... recognizing its identity' (*ibid.* 68; see also Williams 1977; Hodge and Kress 1988).

For Vološinov, then, the sign is constantly being remade, in particular contexts, in the interests of those who make and remake it. These interests differ, and these different interests, all of which leave their mark on the sign, are what makes the sign unstable, complex, 'multiaccented':

The social *multiaccentuality* of the ideological sign is a very crucial aspect. By and large, it is thanks to this intersecting of accents that a sign maintains its vitality and dynamism and the capacity for further development.

(Vološinov 1929/1986: 23)<sup>3</sup>

In the work of Bakhtin, who was, at the very least, closely associated with Vološinov, the concept of *multiaccentuality* is developed into *heteroglossia* and *dialogism*. Meanings constantly interact with each other, since any act of meaning-making is in dialogue with already-existing (and competing) meanings: 'all utterances are heteroglot in that they are functions of a matrix of forces practically impossible to recoup, and therefore impossible to resolve' (Bakhtin 1975/1981: 428; see also Todorov 1984: 60ff.; Holquist 2002: 69). Bakhtin captures well the complexity of the individual entry into sign-making, an entry that is inextricably dialogic:

As a living, socio-ideological concrete thing, as heteroglot opinion, language, for the individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes 'one's own' only

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<sup>3</sup> Stalin had different ideas. He presented a view of language as existing outside struggle and, to all intents and purposes, outside history:

Language ... was created not by some one class, but by the entire society, by all the classes of the society, by the efforts of hundreds of generations. It was created for the satisfaction of the needs not of one particular class, but of the entire society, of all the classes of the society. Precisely for this reason it was created as a single language for the society, common to all members of that society, as the common language of the whole people. Hence the functional role of language ... as a means of intercourse between people ... (Stalin 1954: 5; see also Lecercle 2005: 74-83).

when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language (it is not, after all, out of a dictionary that the speaker gets his words!), but rather it exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one's own. ... Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intentioned; it is populated – overpopulated – with the intentions of others. Expropriating it, forcing it to submit to one's own intentions and accents, is a difficult and complicated process.

(Bakhtin 1975/1981: 293-294)

Bakhtin's representation of the complexity of the struggle that is involved in sign-making, including the violence of the appropriation that this (sometimes) entails, informs the analysis of the students' argument over 'Half Caste' in chapter 6, and also the exploration of the same class's reading(s) of *A View from the Bridge* in chapter 7.

In this account of the sign, it is no longer helpful, or valid, to construe the context of sign-making as merely a set of background variables. Context is all, and is inseparable from the production of meaning (Halliday 1978: 28).

The point has been made very forcefully by Roy Harris, whose integrationist linguistics owes much to Vološinov (as well as to Halliday):

Texts are extrapolations from contexts. ... this makes texts context-dependent. Texts are communicational products, not communicational 'data'. They have no existence except by courtesy of contextualization. As soon as we are persuaded to treat the 'text' as having an independent existence of its own (by reference to which its 'context' is defined) we have already fallen into the subtle trap of *decontextualization*.

(Harris 2006: 22)

As Lecerle observes, 'There is, therefore, no separation between language and the rest of human action' (Lecerle 2005: 70). If that is the case, then clearly any attempt to treat texts, or a particular category of text such as literature, as isolable objects of study, detached from the concrete circumstances of history and culture, is based on false premises. This understanding was central to the attack, mounted by members of the Vološinov/Bakhtin circle, on the formalists' approach to literary criticism. To treat the literary work as 'a datum external to consciousness' was to 'sever it from the objective fact of social intercourse' (Bakhtin and Medvedev 1928/1991: 151). The distinction that the formalists sought to make between the literary work and other texts, other uses of language, was equally unsustainable: 'Every utterance, including the artistic work, is a communication, a message, and is completely inseparable from intercourse. At the same time, the work is never a ready message given once and for all' (*ibid.*).

There are clear connections between the Vološinov/Bakhtin circle's insistence on the sign's contingency, its embeddedness in the specificity of culture and history, and Jauss's version of reception theory, to be explored in the following chapter (3.5.1).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> There is, too, a broader connection between the interest in the Vološinov/Bakhtin circle's work that was shown in the West in the 1970s and 1980s and the movement beyond structuralism in cultural studies and literary criticism. Central to this development was the recognition, across a spectrum of writers working in a more or less Marxist paradigm, of the significance of difference in reading positions, about which I will say more in chapter 3. See also Kristeva (1980), Todorov (1984), Holquist (2002). At times, though, it seems that the (re-)discovery of Vološinov/Bakhtin was more simply fortuitous: Higgins (1999: 196) reveals that Raymond Williams happened upon Vološinov's *Marxism and the Philosophy of*

From the title of *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* as well as from his use of the term 'verbal sign', it is clear that Vološinov's interest is primarily linguistic. He is careful, however, to show that his theory of the sign has much wider applicability:

*Outside objectification, outside embodiment in some particular material (the material of gesture, inner word, outcry), consciousness is a fiction. It is an improper ideological construct created by way of abstraction from the concrete facts of social expression. But consciousness as organized, material expression (in the ideological material of word, a sign, drawing, colors, musical sound, etc.) - consciousness, so conceived, is an objective fact and a tremendous social force.*

(Vološinov 1929/1986: 90; italics in the original)

Like Marx and Engels before him, Vološinov rejects the separation of consciousness and semiosis. Vološinov emphasises, moreover, the materiality of the sign: it is the stuff, the matter, that is worked on by the sign-makers, using the resources that are available, and it is this materiality of the sign that enforces the contingency and specificity of sign-making. Kress's insistence on the importance of a multimodal, rather than a purely linguistic, theory of social semiotics thus might seem to be less a radical departure from existing theory than a development and codification of the theoretical framework already present in Vološinov:

[Social semiotics] rests on several fundamental assumptions: signs are always newly *made* in social interaction; signs are *motivated*, not *arbitrary* relations of meaning and form; the motivated relation of a *form* and a *meaning* is based on and arises out of the *interest* of makers of signs; the forms/signifiers which are used in the making of signs are

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*Language* by accident – he came upon it on the open shelves of Cambridge University Library.

made in social interaction and become part of the semiotic resources of a culture.

(Kress 2010: 54-55, italics in original)<sup>5</sup>

The implications of this approach to sign-making are explored in later chapters: in chapters 6 and 8, particular emphasis is placed on the materiality of the sign-making in which school students engage, while in chapter 10 attention is focused on the interests of the two students as they are revealed in the PowerPoint presentation that they create.

This might be an apt place to draw attention to an implication of the view of the sign that is being proposed here. To conceptualise people in general, or readers in particular, not as 'users' of pre-existing signs but rather as sign-makers is to suggest that what is going on in such activity is a form of work. Marx, who described work as 'the eternal natural condition of human existence' (Marx 1867/1976: 998), was careful to present purposiveness as a defining characteristic of labour:

Man not only effects a change of form in the materials of nature; he also realizes ... his own purpose in these materials. And this is a purpose he is conscious of, it determines the mode of his activity with the rigidity of a law, and he must subordinate his will to it.

(Marx 1867/1976: 284)

Part of what is significant about this is the emphasis on the irreducibly intellectual nature of work. Wage labour under capitalism thus becomes only

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<sup>5</sup> Kress's emphasis on the non-arbitrary relation of form and meaning, of signifier and signified, does indeed mark a breach with dominant theories of the sign from Locke onwards. But, as Vološinov or Bakhtin would argue, this difference needs to be understood contextually. For Locke, the arbitrariness of the sign was an important (rationalist) bulwark against contemporary beliefs in the god-given power of words to reveal essential truths about the things to which the words referred (see Aarsleff 1982). For Kress, the contrary position – that there is a motivated relation of signifier and signified – is also a means of asserting (human) agency in semiotic processes.



one – deformed – instance of work (see also Marx 1973: 110). In a magnificent passage in *The Long Revolution*, Raymond Williams develops this Marxist conception of work. Rejecting a narrowly economic view, Williams insists on the central place of cultural activity within an alternative conception of work:

It has been the gravest error of socialism, in revolt against class societies, to limit itself, so often, to the terms of its opponents: to propose a political and economic order, rather than a human order. It is of course necessary to see the facts of power and property as obstacles to this order, but the alternative society that is proposed must be in wider terms, if it is to generate the full energies necessary for its creation. ... A good particular example of this general problem is the question of the definition of work, which has been discussed and then neglected in the socialist tradition. Our common meaning of work has become 'effort rewarded by money': comparable effort, either of a 'private' or 'public' kind, may be as much work, but is described as 'leisure-time activity' or, curiously, 'good works'.  
... The integration of work and life, and the inclusion of activities we call cultural in the ordinary social organization, are the basic terms of an alternative form of society.

(Williams 1961/1965: 131-132)

This was not, however, a project that could simply be consigned to some imagined future: Williams' argument is that the everyday work of cultural production needs to be acknowledged (and valued) in contemporary society. His conception of culture as everyday activity, everyday activity as the making and remaking of culture, and his insistence that such activity should be taken seriously, informs my argument about reading, in chapter 3 (below) and throughout this thesis: that reading needs to be conceptualised as a complex set of motivated, historied processes, not merely as the acquisition of a set of skills or as a preparation for something else.

## 2.2 Towards a theory of learning

The quotation from Marx and Engels (1970) that was my starting-point for the previous section offers more than a theory of the sign; it also asserts an absolutely fundamental connection between language (or sign-making) and consciousness (or thought) – and it is to the implications of this that I will now turn. My main focus in this section will be on the body of research and scholarship within a Vygotskian sociocultural tradition.

Lev Vygotsky, the Soviet psychologist whose work from the 1920s and early 1930s has become increasingly widely known over the past half century, provides us with a set of insights into learning that are immensely powerful.<sup>6</sup> Of central importance to the current argument are three aspects of Vygotskian theory. First, there is the understanding that the relationship between thought and semiotic activity is a complicated one: language enables the development of thought, gives learners access to resources beyond their immediate experience, but the process whereby learners develop a full sense of a word is a lengthy one. To be given a dictionary definition – the meaning – of a word is not enough; learners need time to explore the connotative dimensions that have accreted around the sign as it is used, and has been used, and to fill out for themselves the semiotic

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<sup>6</sup> This is, of course, an oversimplification. Vygotsky did not work alone and his work took place in a particular context – the aftermath of the Russian Revolution of 1917. His exploration of problems in relation to how children learn was given an urgency by the revolutionary context of his work: the aim was to make a new society, and education had a key role to place in its construction. Equally, Vygotsky's ideas have a history that extends back over centuries of Western thought. For a more detailed account of this intellectual history, see Van der Veer and Valsiner (1991); Bakhurst (1990, 1991); Hardcastle (2009); Rey (2011).

potential of that sign (see Bakhtin, above; Vygotsky 1987: 276-285; Gregory 1996: 16-18; Kellogg 2009: 94-95).<sup>7</sup>

The second aspect, closely related to the complexity of the relationship between thought and sign, is the complexity of the process whereby 'scientific concepts' are acquired. What Vygotsky meant by scientific concepts was, very loosely, disciplinary knowledge – the kind of codified, abstract ways of understanding the world that are, at least to some extent, represented in school subjects.<sup>8</sup> What Vygotsky insisted on was the necessity of a dialectical relationship between scientific and everyday (or spontaneous) concepts: the latter, the concepts that learners bring with them from their lives outside school, are the intellectual resources that enable them to make sense of the scientific concepts that they are presented with in the school curriculum, the ideas that will be reorganised and transformed through the processes of schooling. To suggest that there is a dialectical relationship between everyday and scientific concepts, however, is to make a further claim, namely, that the everyday knowledge that the students bring may also transform and reorganise the curricularised knowledge of schooling.<sup>9</sup> As

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<sup>7</sup> Vygotsky's exploration of the difference between meaning and sense had, as he acknowledged (1987: 266-267), an immediate source in the work of the French psychologist Frédéric Paulhan (1927). It can also be seen as a response to Frege's distinction between sense and reference (Frege 1892/1997; see also Makin 2010). Whereas Frege attempts to define sense in such a way as to exclude any subjective element, both Paulhan and Vygotsky use the term to insist on the importance of subjectivity, of the interests of the sign-maker.

<sup>8</sup> The relationship between school subjects and academic disciplines is, of course, not straightforward – a point that has been made by Engeström (1996) and by Lave and Wenger (1991).

<sup>9</sup> Since the 'rediscovery' of Vygotsky in the 1960s, his intellectual legacy has remained a subject of fierce contestation. It is clear that his ideas were developing, and there are internal tensions and contradictions in what is available to us. What I am presenting here is a necessarily simplified account. It is also one that contests a number of readings of the Vygotsky that I find somewhat reductive. For a fuller

Vygotsky was at pains to emphasise, these theoretical insights are confirmed by teachers' practical experiences:

No less than experimental research, pedagogical experience demonstrates that *direct instruction in concepts is impossible*. It is pedagogically fruitless. The teacher who attempts to use this approach achieves nothing but a mindless learning of words, an empty verbalism that simulates or imitates the presence of concepts in the child. Under these conditions, the child learns not the concept but the word, and this word is taken over by the child through memory rather than thought. Such knowledge turns out to be inadequate in any meaningful application. This mode of instruction is the basic defect of the purely scholastic verbal modes of teaching which have been universally condemned. *It substitutes the learning of dead and empty verbal schemes for the mastery of living knowledge.*

(Vygotsky 1987: 170, my emphases)

To suggest this means having to reconceptualise the notion of access. No longer is it enough to throw open the school gates and allow the students to enter. As the authors of the Bullock Report acknowledged:

No child should be expected to cast off the language and culture of the home as he crosses the school threshold, nor to live and act as though school and home represent two totally separate and different cultures which have to be kept firmly apart.

(DES 1975: 286)

In part, this argument is about the practicalities of pedagogy. School students will, whether one likes it or not, arrive in the classroom with all sorts of other experiences, with histories that will inform their school identities and the sense that they make of school knowledge. They will have particular interests in the knowledge that the school has to offer.

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account of these debates, see Britton (1987); Bakhurst (1990, 1991); Daniels (2001); Gillen (2000), Kozulin *et al.* (2003).

In part, this argument is about the ethical implications for teachers' practice. Following the line taken by the Bullock Report, I am suggesting that part of the respect that teachers owe to their students is to attend to their lives, cultures, histories and experiences beyond the school gates, to see these out-of-school identities as integral to the students' identities within the classroom. And this does mean that teachers might usefully make it their business to find out about their students, to find out about their other languages and literacies, to find out about the 'funds of knowledge' (Moll 1994, 2000; Gonzalez *et al.* 2005) that are valorised within their communities.

In part, however, this argument is about the construction of knowledge itself – not merely about pedagogic strategy or about ethical obligations but about the day-to-day remaking of knowledge in the classroom. In the chapters that follow, attention is directed towards those moments when school students' out-of-school knowledge is brought into productive – dialectical – relationship with school knowledge. This can be seen, for example, in chapter 5, in the Year 8 class's exploration of *Julius Caesar*, as well as in chapters 6 and 7, in the Year 10 class's work on a range of texts. What we see in these classrooms, I argue, is not the encapsulation of school knowledge (Engeström 1996), the production and reproduction of some limited form of curricularised knowledge that bears scant relation to the disciplinary knowledge that it is supposed to reflect, or provide access to; what we get is the thing itself – a full intellectual engagement with texts and with meaning-making in which disciplinary knowledge is being remade and in which there

are no absolute divisions between such disciplinary knowledge and the participants' everyday knowledge, their knowledge of the world.

The third aspect of Vygotskian theory that I want to foreground is the emphasis on the social, on learning happening in the interaction between people and on that learning being mediated through culture and history. Learning, in other words, is not something that occurs in isolated individuals, or, to put it more polemically, 'The 'isolated individual' is a myth' (Cole and Scribner 1974: 8):

...we cannot imagine any intellectual function that does not have a sociocultural character. Perception, memory, and thinking all develop as part of the general socialization of a child and are inseparably bound up with the patterns of activity, communication and social relations into which he enters.

(Cole and Scribner 1974: 8)

One way of exploring this idea, and its implications for learning in general and schooling in particular, is through the zone of proximal development (or ZPD).<sup>10</sup> Whether or not the concept should properly be attributed to Vygotsky (Van der Veer and Valsiner 1991: 331), the ZPD has become firmly established as part of the Soviet psychologist's contribution to learning theory. In its appearance in *Mind in Society* (Vygotsky 1978), the idea of the zone of proximal development emerges in the context of a discussion of assessment, and specifically as a challenge to already dominant ideas about IQ testing and ability as a fixed individual attribute from which subsequent

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<sup>10</sup> A version of the following discussion of the ZPD appeared in Yandell (2007).

attainment can be extrapolated (Kozulin 1998: 69).<sup>11</sup> In *Thinking and Speech*, on the other hand, the zone of proximal development becomes centrally implicated in Vygotsky's probing of the role of instruction in the development of scientific concepts: the assertion that 'what the child is able to do in collaboration today he will be able to do independently tomorrow' (Vygotsky 1987: 211) opens up the possibility of social models of learning. The zone of proximal development is thus directly relevant to questions of pedagogy: what Vygotsky was grappling with was the issue of intervention – of the ways in which an individual's development can be assisted (Wells 1999, 2000). What, in other words, is the role of instruction – and hence what is the teacher's role? How is the zone of proximal development construed, and how is it relevant to the consideration of teachers' construction of English as a school subject?

Within the discursive field of recent government policy on literacy in the UK, one version of the ZPD has attained an influential space. In a metaphor borrowed from Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976), the teacher's role is to provide 'scaffolding' for the learner's linguistic development in general and, more particularly, the move to writing.<sup>12</sup> Thus in the *Key Stage 3 English*

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<sup>11</sup> The main discussion of the ZPD in *Mind in Society* occurs in chapter 6, 'Interaction between learning and development' (Vygotsky 1978: 84-91). It is also mentioned, in a very different context, in the following chapter ('The role of play in development'): I consider this later reference in chapter 12 (below).

<sup>12</sup> Stone (1998) and Harrison (2002) ascribe the first use of 'scaffolding' to Wood *et al.* (1976). However, in an earlier contribution, Bruner (1975) uses the term to refer to the interaction between a mother and her child:

In such instances, mothers most often see their role as supporting the child in achieving an intended outcome, entering only to assist or reciprocate or 'scaffold' the action. 'Scaffolding' refers to the mother's effort to limit, so to speak, those degrees of freedom in the task that the child is not able to control – holding an object

*Framework*, 'scaffolding' is presented as one of a range of 'effective teaching styles,' intended 'to support pupils' early efforts and build security and confidence' (DfEE 2001b:16); in the advice on developing *Literacy across the Curriculum* (DfEE 2001c), teachers are exhorted to teach writing by, *inter alia*, 'scaffolding the first attempts', advice that is repeated in in-service training materials, where more information is provided as to what the scaffolding might consist of:

Scaffold the writing. Pupils could:

- Use a writing frame which provides overall structure and typical language
- Use a word bank
- Add written sections to a semi-complete version of the text
- Use an existing writing template on computer (DfEE 2001a: 44).

The term is used both as a shorthand for a variety of tools that can be provided to assist the emergent writer, as above, and also as a way of conceptualising the sequence of learning activities:

The teaching sequence is designed to scaffold success for all, and the steps between the learning activities are small enough to allow little mistakes to be picked up so naturally and quickly that no one needs to make a big mistake. This means intervening early to correct errors, not allowing them to become embedded.

(DfEE 2001d: ix)

The connection between the concept of scaffolding and its Vygotskian origins is made explicit in Harrison's research report on the Strategy (Harrison 2002: 17) and in Beard's echo of Vygotsky in his definition:

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steady while the child tries to extract something from it, screening the child from distraction, etc. (Bruner 1975:12).

What is noteworthy about this earlier coinage is that the activity thus described is one initiated by the child – not part of a planned intervention by the mother.



'Scaffolding' refers to a process that enables pupils to solve a problem or carry out a task which would be beyond their unassisted efforts.

(Beard 1998: 39)

What unites all these forms of scaffolding is the way in which they position the learner and the teacher, the assumptions that are made about agency, knowledge and pedagogy. The learner is presented as incapable: without sufficient scaffolding, her first attempts would, presumably, collapse; she is prone to 'little mistakes'; she is defined, in effect, by her inability. The teacherly other, in contrast, is the one who knows, who 'correct[s] errors' and whose shaping of texts (through the use of writing frames and the provision of 'semi-complete' versions) ensures the acceptability – and hence success – of the learner's attempts at writing. Wray and Lewis, whose work on the development of literacy was hugely influential in determining the content and orientation of the Literacy Strategy as the UK government's intervention in pedagogy, make the claim that Vygotsky 'put forward the notion that pupils first experience a particular cognitive activity in collaboration with expert practitioners' (Wray and Lewis 2000: 26). They proceed to redefine the zone of proximal development as a four-stage process whereby expertise is transferred from expert to learner:

1. Demonstration
2. Joint activity
3. Supported activity
4. Individual activity

(Wray and Lewis 2000: 26-27;  
see also Wray and Lewis 1997: 21-22)

It is worth noting that the end-product is both the acquisition of expertise (knowledge or skill) and autonomy. The process is fleshed out by another contributor to the same volume:

Teaching is about scaffolding: the model of teaching demonstrated here is very complex, but is based on the belief that teaching is not simply about the transfer of a body of knowledge. More importantly the teacher is one mechanism through which children are given the structure and pathway in which the subject content becomes the vehicle for other skills. This role as an 'expert facilitator' is one where children's learning is 'scaffolded' rather than 'constructed'. ... The outcomes of learning are in some ways modeled by the teacher, and the students then apply this 'expert' view to their own understanding. The eventual aim under this model is that the students should become equipped to carry out the work and learning for themselves, so that the expert facilitator can withdraw.

(Greig 2000: 88-89)

Though Greig is at pains to emphasise that what is being advocated here is not (old-fashioned) transmission, it would seem that the difference is that what is being transferred from expert to novice is both content and skills: it is, in other words, still a transmission process, but one in which more is delivered. Learners, it is acknowledged, are different from each other, but only in their 'levels of ability.' What is not at issue in this model is the direction of transfer. At the end of the process, the reason that the expert is able to withdraw is because the learners have become like the expert. In essence, then, this is a technicist version of the zone of proximal development, from which all questions of subjectivity, of culture, of power relations and possible conflict have been removed. It positions the teacher as expert and the process of learning as one that enables the replication of the teacher's expertise. As Searle (1984) asked, 'Who's scaffolding whose building?'

A radically different conception of the zone of proximal development has been developed by those for whom the significance of Vygotskian thought lies in its attention to what might be termed sociocultural perspectives. It is to

this interpretation that I will now turn.<sup>13</sup> Vygotsky's ideas about the ZPD were still evolving at the time of his death (Wells 1999, 2000). As Daniels (2001) observes, a richer version of the ZPD has been produced by reading Vygotsky in conjunction with his contemporary, Bakhtin, and in particular the latter's 'emphasis on multiple voices engaged in the construction of ... meaning which is not necessarily located within the individual' (Daniels 2001: 67; see also Tolman 1999, Moll and Whitmore 1993). Bakhtinian heteroglossia renders problematic the dyadic simplicity of the expert-novice relationship, and hence:

Multiple and possibly conflicting discourses with different sociocultural historical origins may be in play within the ZPD. This view of the ZPD as the nexus of social, cultural, historical influences takes us far beyond the image of the lone learner with the directive and determining tutor. It provides a much expanded view of the 'social' and the possibility of a dialectical conception of interaction within the ZPD.

(Daniels 2001: 67)

What would be the consequences of such a view of the ZPD for classroom practice? What forms of pedagogy would be implicated in the ZPD as a fully sociocultural space? And, more specifically, what literacy practices might be accommodated, developed and promoted within a classroom where the ZPD could be conceptualised in this way?

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<sup>13</sup> Lave and Wenger (1991; Wenger 1998) counterpose the view of the ZPD as scaffolding with cultural and societal and collectivist interpretations: their model of situated learning as legitimate peripheral participation in communities of practice can be construed as a sociocultural investigation of the ZPD. However, though Lave and Wenger admit the possibility of conflict and change within the community of practice, the central relationship within their model remains the dyad of newcomer and oldtimer – a dyad which may not seem entirely at variance with Wray and Lewis's expert-novice relationship. On the limitations of Lave and Wenger's dyadic model, see, for example, Fuller *et al.* (2005).

Daniels' emphasis on 'a dialectical conception of interaction' returns us to the issue of knowledge and power, of scientific and spontaneous concepts. The attempts by Daniels and Wertsch to synthesise Vygotskian and Bakhtinian perspectives have been challenged by Wegerif (2008). Wegerif argues that there are fundamental, ontological differences between Vygotskian dialectic and Bakhtinian dialogic, between Vygotsky's commitment to modernist, Enlightenment values and Bakhtin's suspicion of such values. There may well be real tensions here, but I am inclined to the view that Wegerif overstates them through a selective reading of both Vygotsky and Bakhtin. First, Wegerif reads Bakhtin through the prism of postmodernism, through Derrida and Merleau-Ponty, so that heteroglossia becomes fairly closely aligned with Derridean *différance*. What becomes marginalised in this version of Bakhtin is both the closeness to Vološinov's explicitly Marxist theory of the sign and the significance within Bakhtin of change – change accomplished in the struggle with and through language. Bakhtin's description of the expropriation of language, 'forcing it to submit to one's own intentions and accents' in 'a difficult and complicated process' (1975/1981: 294) is much closer to a Vygotskian view of development than Wegerif allows.

Equally, Wegerif's reading of Vygotsky is a selective one, adopting the reductive, dyadic interpretation of the ZPD, which Daniels has contested (above). Emphasising Vygotsky's links with Hegelian dialectic, Wegerif tends to underestimate Vygotsky's materialism, his insistence on the concrete and on the specificity of historical experience. Thus, for example, where Wegerif quotes Vygotsky on the 'monologous' quality of written language, what

Wegerif neglects is the context in which this occurs: the comment is made as part of a discussion about the difficulty of beginning to write – a discussion that is fundamentally pedagogic in orientation, as is clear from Vygotsky's description of writing as 'a conversation with a white sheet of paper' (Vygotsky 1987: 202): still a conversation then, and thus still less than entirely monologic.

Vygotsky, like Bakhtin and Vološinov, understood that 'concepts or word meanings develop, and ... this developmental process is complex and delicate' (*ibid.*: 171). Later in the same chapter, Vygotsky, having just quoted Marx on the reason why scientific concepts are necessary ('if the form in which a thing is manifested and its essence were in direct correspondence, science would be unnecessary'), makes the point that any scientific concept has to be understood in relation to a system of concepts (*ibid.*: 193).

Wegerif's reading of Vygotsky tends to treat scientific concepts – the authoritative bodies of disciplinary knowledge – as the fixed point, as the monologic goal of instruction, but this is to ignore Vygotsky's emphasis on the dialectical relationship between the two kinds of concept – a point which is further complicated by his later admission that spontaneous concepts might also be the product of instruction outside the context of schooling (*ibid.*: 238).

This last suggestion by Vygotsky is significant, to the extent that it once again foregrounds the social: concepts, whether scientific or 'spontaneous' are developed in interaction with others. Recent research by Hobson and others (2002, 2006; see also Tomasello 1999, Hasan 2002, 2005) is worth mentioning in this context. Investigation of the very early stages of

development in children has led Hobson to posit three key influences: symbolic play, the growing awareness of self and others, and language all work together, interacting with each other in the development of thought. For Hobson and for Tomasello, just as for Marx and Engels, the social and the semiotic are inextricably linked in human development, with each other and with the achievement of consciousness:

The symbolic representations that children learn in their social interactions with other persons are special because they are (a) intersubjective, in the sense that a symbol is socially 'shared' with other persons; and (b) perspectival, in the sense that each symbol picks out a particular way of viewing some phenomenon (categorization being a special case of this process). The central theoretical point is that linguistic symbols embody the myriad ways of construing the world intersubjectively that have accumulated in a culture over historical time, and the process of acquiring the conventional use of these symbolic artifacts, and so internalizing these construals, fundamentally transforms the nature of children's cognitive representations.

(Tomasello 1999: 95-96)

Tomasello's picture of development as always simultaneously social and semiotic, his representation of the social as the site where meanings are made and re-made, on the 'intersubjective' and 'perspectival' character of the semiotic work that transforms children's minds, returns us to the insight from Marx and Engels with which this chapter began.

This chapter has emphasised the primacy of the social. Rejecting what Ilyenkov refers to as 'a Robinson Crusoe model of epistemology' (Ilyenkov 1960/2008: 40), it has insisted on the social and historical nature of consciousness, and on the need to see readers as historically situated agents. The following chapter explores strands in a social model of reading,

while the fourth chapter sketches out some aspects of a research methodology consonant with the theoretical positions that have been suggested here.

### Chapter 3

## Literacies and literature

What policy says about reading and the development of reading is informed by deep-seated, normative assumptions about what reading is and what it is for. The dominant paradigm of reading is vividly represented in the opening scene of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847). We first meet the ten-year-old Jane as she escapes from the obnoxious Mrs Reed and her three children by hiding in a window seat, where she settles down to read Bewick's *History of British Birds*. What is paradigmatic about this moment is Jane's solitariness, her absorption in the world of the book and the extent to which her communion with the book is a means of escaping from the unpleasant reality of the world around her into the richer, more satisfying realm of her own imagination. Jane's reading within the novel is paralleled in Virginia Woolf's reading of the novel eighty years later:

So intense is our absorption that if someone moves in the room the movement seems to take place not there but up in Yorkshire. The writer has us by the hand, forces us along her road, makes us see what she sees, never leaves us for a moment or allows us to forget her. At the end we are steeped through and through with the genius, the vehemence, the indignation of Charlotte Brontë.

(Woolf 1925: 155)

Woolf's use of the first person plural to describe the reading experience enforces the sense that the experience is generalisable – that it is, indeed, the experience of the 'common reader', common to all (proficient) readers. We, Woolf insists, are lost in the world of the book, willingly surrendering ourselves to the 'genius' of the consciousness of the author.



This conception of what it is to read, and of the rewards that are attendant on such ways of reading, particularly when the object of such reading is a literary text, have come to seem mere common sense.

### 3.1 Reading in the National Curriculum

Reading: during key stages 3 and 4 pupils read a wide range of texts independently, both for pleasure and for study. They become enthusiastic, discriminating and responsive readers, understanding layers of meaning and appreciating what they read on a critical level  
(DfEE 1999a: 49)<sup>1</sup>

The National Curriculum presents a very definite picture of what reading is, what it is for and how it happens. A marginal note, attached to the outline of the knowledge, skills and understanding to be taught during key stages 3 and 4, summarises what the products of the process of statutory schooling will have experienced and what they will have become. Within the secondary curriculum, attention is paid to the breadth of reading experience and there is a recognition of different purposes, 'pleasure' as well as 'study': one might wish to question whether these two terms represent a binary opposition, mutually exclusive possibilities, or points at opposite ends of a continuum. In either case, though, such reading is to be conducted 'independently'. In this, the programme of study for key stages 3 and 4 continues an emphasis that is also present in the key stages of the primary curriculum:

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<sup>1</sup> As a general rule, the version of the National Curriculum from which I quote is the version (DfEE 1999a) that was in force at the time when my data were collected (2005-06). The argument I make in this section, about the paradigm of reading and reading development that informs the National Curriculum, is equally pertinent to all versions of the National Curriculum that have been produced thus far.

In English, during key stage 1 pupils ... begin to read and write *independently* and with enthusiasm.

Reading: during key stage 1 pupils' interest and pleasure in reading is developed as they learn to read confidently and *independently*. They focus on words and sentences and how they fit into whole texts. They work out the meaning of straightforward texts and say why they like them or do not like them.

Reading: during key stage 2 pupils read enthusiastically a range of materials and use their knowledge of words, sentences and texts to understand and respond to the meaning. *They increase their ability to read challenging and lengthy texts independently*. They reflect on the meaning of texts, analysing and discussing them with others

(DfEE 1999b: 44, 46, 53, emphases added)

From the very beginning, then, reading is associated with independence.

The reading that the National Curriculum describes – and prescribes, given its statutory force – is marked, likewise, by specific readerly behaviours and attitudes of mind. The act of reading is somehow bound up with enthusiasm (across all key stages). It entails understanding of meanings that reside in the text – meanings that become less straightforward, more layered, as the pupils become older. And it involves acts of articulated discrimination: for infants, this is presented as saying 'why they like .. or do not like' the texts they have read; for secondary students, it is about becoming increasingly 'discriminating and responsive', 'appreciating what they read on a critical level'. (The presentation of these different facets of the reading process might be construed as an indication of a temporal sequence: the reader approaches the (unread) text with enthusiasm, discovers what it means, then judges it.)

By the end of the years of statutory education, then, students emerge as particular kinds of reader: independent, enthusiastic, competent at

uncovering meaning(s), and discriminating. This is the model of reading that the National Curriculum promotes and enforces; these are the readers constructed through the discourse of government policy and legislation. But where does this model come from? Is it the only available model? And does it accurately reflect practice – is this the reading that is to be found in schools?

### 3.2 A brief history of reading

St Ambrose, bishop of Milan in the fifth century, amazed his pupil, St Augustine of Hippo, with his ability to read silently. Augustine offers two explanations for Ambrose's behaviour. One, rather prosaic, is that he needed to spare his voice; the other implies a distinct and highly-developed social practice:

Perhaps he was afraid that, if he read aloud, some obscure passage in the author he was reading might raise a question in the mind of an attentive listener, and he would then have to explain the meaning or even discuss some of the more difficult points.

(Augustine 1961: 114)

Ambrose's silent reading, then, took the activity out of its normal social context: what is clear from Augustine's account is just how unusual Ambrose was as a reader within the classical period. The library at Alexandria must have been a pretty noisy place (Manguel 1996). But Ambrose has come to stand as something different from the anomaly whose antisocial behaviour needed an explanation. In Fischer's (2003) *History of Reading*, for example, St Ambrose takes on an iconic value, pointing in the direction that reading

would develop. He prefigures the modern — ‘common’ — reader, communing silently and alone with the text.

Fischer pays attention to all the other aspects of reading that have varied across the millennia. He details the changes in medium, from stone and clay to papyrus scroll and parchment codex, and considers the happy confluence of printing press, paper, Protestantism and the first buds of capitalism in Renaissance Europe. He welcomes the gradual improvement in the physical conditions for reading – from the production of spectacles to the advances in artificial lighting. He charts the significance of alphabetic scripts, of the introduction of punctuation, of upper and lower case letters and the regularisation of spelling. Along the way are many interesting nuggets – such as the way that gender differences were encoded in Japanese literacy not just in the specialisation of different genres but also in different writing systems. These are tangential, though, to the linear narrative that is, as it were, his main plot, and the material changes in the production of text are seen as contributory factors. For Fischer the most significant transformation is the arrival of silent reading. For him, this moved reading from a public to a private act, from a social function to a human faculty (2003: 162). In this account, only such individual interactions with text as can occur without noise count as proper acts of reading.

Such definitions, however commonsensical they might appear, are a problem. Because Fischer argues for the centrality of the solitary, ‘fluent’ reader, proper reading is presented as a visual (or tactile) experience. The

text is encountered spatially. Fischer is happy to include new technologies, comfortable with the reading revolutions of computers and the internet – but refuses to recognise as reading anything that involves the ear: ‘Reading by hearing,’ he asserts, ‘is no longer reading but being read to’ (2003: 336).

What would Fischer make of a reader such as David Blunkett, a blind man who can use Braille but much preferred his civil servants to read papers to him (Carvel 2000)? Is only the former practice to be construed as reading? What, equally, of the public, communal acts of reading that dominated not only the literacy of mediaeval monasteries but also the cigar-making factories of nineteenth-century Cuba and twentieth-century America (Manguel 1996: 110)?

What makes Fischer’s exclusions problematic is that he purports to offer a universal account of reading. Indeed, he sets out with the best of pluralist intentions. There is an acknowledgement that ‘the act of reading is variable, not absolute’ (Fischer 2003: 11). Somewhere along the line, however, such inclusiveness runs up against a set of prejudices. Take, for instance, Fischer’s characterisation of reading in a Benedictine monastery:

Some of it was private and silent. Most was public and loud, however: not to learn and grow, nor even to be entertained, but to lose oneself in the common indoctrination. It was not individual liberation, but communal submersion, not unlike the text-read megaphone indoctrination of twentieth-century labour camps.

(Fischer 2003: 93-94)

When Fischer is dealing with public reading as a developmental stage, he can document what people meant by reading in a neutral, informative way.

He recognises that the Greek word for reading meant reading aloud – and was in Ionian Greek inseparable from the sense of convincing someone, talking someone into doing something. For Fischer, these meanings are signs that reading was not, two thousand years ago, the unique act it has become. In other words, what he does is to seek to marginalise (or, in the history of written language, infantilise) the social aspects of reading, seeing them as counterposed to the intellectual function of reading. Fischer's teleological account can, then, be construed as a cultural-historical version of the National Curriculum's developmental model.

For others, though, the evidence of what reading was in other periods and societies should not be construed as merely an evolutionary stage in the development of reading; instead, such differences in practice illuminate the specific and partial nature of our society's assumptions about reading. Daniel Boyarin suggests that:

'Reading,' in ancient Jewish culture signifies an act which is oral, social and collective, while in modern (and early-modern) Europe it signifies an act that belongs to a private or semiprivate social space. ... A semantic analysis of the distribution of the root *qr'* in biblical Hebrew reveals ... a range of meanings including 'to call,' 'to proclaim,' 'to summon or invite,' and 'to read.' It will be immediately observed that the whole semantic field to which these glosses belong is that of speech acts and not of passive reception.

(Boyarin, D. 1993: 11-12)

Boyarin cites the biblical description of reading in *II Kings* 22, where the scribe reads the Torah aloud in the presence of the king and the king is then said to have read the scroll. He goes on to argue that, within the Hebrew culture of the biblical and Talmudic periods:

there was simply no word in that language at all which meant what we mean by 'reading a book,' that is, the essentially private, individual consumption of narrative with the effect of and for the purpose of 'pleasure.'

(*ibid.*: 18)

Similarly, Howe (1993) presents a view of reading within Anglo-Saxon society as an inescapably social practice. On the Old English words *raed* and *raedan*, Howe points out that 'these words and their cognate forms in other Indo-European languages first denoted the act of giving counsel through speech' (Howe 1993: 60). The mediaeval 'textual community' that he describes is one that can be seen as belonging to the same traditions of practice as those that can be inferred from Augustine's account of Ambrose's silence:

... a group bound together by the reading aloud of texts to listeners for the purpose of interpretation. In a culture unaccustomed to the written text, the act of reading would have seemed remarkably like solving a riddle. For it meant translating meaningless but somehow magical squiggles on a leaf of vellum into significant discourse ....

(Howe 1993: 62-63)

It is not only Fischer who has associated the development of printing with the creation of individual, independent readers. In contrasting the sociability of a predominantly oral society with the privacy of print culture, Eisenstein claims that reading is a process enacted by isolated individuals:

By its very nature, a reading public was not only more dispersed; it was also more atomistic and individualistic than a hearing one. ... The notion that society may be regarded as a bundle of discrete units or that the individual is prior to the social group seems to be more compatible with a reading public than with a hearing one.

(Eisenstein 1983: 95)

The materialist determinism of this account has been challenged, for example by Adrian Johns, who reasserts the diversity of print cultures and the need to pay attention to particular historical circumstances and argues for an approach that:

recognizes that texts, printed or not, cannot compel readers to react in specific ways, but that they must be interpreted in cultural spaces the character of which helps to decide what counts as proper reading.

(Johns 1998: 20)

Fabian goes further in suggesting that the notion of reading as a silent, solitary, sedentary and ocular process is an ideological construct, serving to maintain a particular power relationship between text and reader:

... oralization, that is, recourse to audible speech, actual or imagined, is an essential part of our ability to read texts. Yet our 'ideology' of literacy seems to put a taboo on revealing what we actually do when we read, for fear that oralization might subvert the authority of the written text. Such an attitude might be described as a kind of textual fundamentalism ....

(Fabian 1993: 89)

David Bartine's (1989) account of the development of theories of reading in eighteenth-century England provides plentiful evidence of the dominance of what he terms 'oral reading,' a shared view of reading as a rhetorical and oratorical skill which was at its strongest, most communicative and persuasive when closest to speech (as in reading aloud) and most enfeebled when limited by the imperfect and subordinate mode of writing (as in silent reading). Bartine's survey suggests that this view was challenged during the century, as more attention began to be paid to the advantages of the written



language and as a view of writing as an autonomous form of language began to gain greater currency.

In July 2001, the President of the United States met a group of children from a primary school in Hackney, East London. Mr Bush listened while his wife read a story. He then commented on the importance of literacy: 'You teach a child to read, and he or her will be able to pass a literacy test' (as reported in the *Times Educational Supplement*, 24 August, 2001). It is intriguing that the leader of the most powerful nation on earth had such a circular view of literacy, what it is and what it is for. Children are taught to read so that they can pass a test which, presumably, is designed to assess whether they can read.

George Bush's model — that learning to read is important because one is thereby enabled to pass a literacy test — would have made perfect sense to criminals in Tudor or Stuart England. From mediaeval times, a member of the clergy could not be condemned to death for his first capital offence. Instead, he was branded on the hand or thumb — M for murder, T for theft. (He could, however, be executed if convicted of a second offence.) This 'benefit of clergy' was extended to anyone who could read. The courts determined whether the accused was literate or not by giving him a reading test. The test passage was usually the first verse of Psalm 51:

Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy loving  
kindness; according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies,  
blot out my transgressions.

(Psalm 51:1)

This was known as the neck verse. Many criminals learned the passage by heart whilst in jail and were able to read the passage when on trial. Often references to this practice suggest that the condemned men were not actually reading, that the act of committing the verse to memory was, in effect, cheating. Not having undergone the prescribed course in phonics, they were pretending to read (but not actually reading). But, as George Bush understands, these men had indeed learned to read — they were functionally literate. (Functional illiteracy, for them, would have had a simple consequence: hanging.)

For many Muslim people today, literacy in Arabic constitutes a different kind of literacy from literacy in other languages. It is about recognising grapho-phonetic correspondences, and so being able to produce the right sounds, when reading the *Qu'ran* aloud (see Goody 1987: 215). Such literacy is, of course, not confined to Islam: Latin has occupied an equivalent place within the rituals and liturgy of the Roman Catholic Church.

Overlapping but nonetheless distinguishable from Johns' concept of what counts as proper reading is the issue of who counts as a proper reader. In the Renaissance, argues Kevin Sharpe, the relation of text to reader was determined by the power relationship existing between writers and their patrons:

Patronage, for example, the tradition not only of dedicating to patrons but writing as if for them primarily, implicitly placed the reader in a position of greater authority (as he or she usually was) than the author. The dedicatee not only provided the livelihood that was the most basic precondition of writing, but also facilitated publication, authorised the work

and at times used influence to bypass the censor. The patronage system placed the reader, chronologically and hierarchically, before the author of the text; and arguably the decline of aristocratic patronage was necessary for the emerging prominence of the author by the early eighteenth century.

(Sharpe 2000: 40)

Central to Sharpe's argument is the historically specific, autonomous position of Renaissance readers (or at least some readers, given that patrons and readers were not coterminous groups). For him the Protestant reformation entails a reconfiguration of the reader:

Experience, not least the bitter quarrels over the interpretation of biblical passages during the English reformation, had instructed that, like it or not, textual meaning was not absolute, that individuals read – and even chose to read — differently.

(Sharpe 2000: 42)

It would appear, then, that for Sharpe, as for Fischer and Eisenstein, the independent reader is a product of the social, ideological and technological movements and changes of early modern Europe. What also emerges from Sharpe's analysis, however, is a curiously context-free (and hence ahistorical) model of the activity of reading. 'Because reading is an individual experience,' he announces, 'its history has in part to be written from case studies' (Sharpe 2000: ix). Sharpe thus accepts as unproblematic the commonsense notion that reading occurs, as it were, in the communion of the individual reader with the text. It is this assumption which prompts him to take issue with Stanley Fish's concept of an interpretive community, which:

ultimately makes the act of reading comprehensible only as a group activity, rather than an individual act. We are left asking how meaning was constituted by the individual reader engaging with a particular text at a particular moment.

(Sharpe 2000: 60-1)

I will return later to the concept of an interpretive community. For now, though, the significant point about Sharpe's contribution is this: that even in a work as acutely conscious of historicity (and of the problems of historicity) as this is, even in a work so preoccupied with the nuances of reading and interpretation, there lies at its heart an unexamined assumption about the very process of reading – that it is, necessarily, an individual act rather than a group activity. Such assumptions run counter to Darnton's claim that 'for the common people in early modern Europe, reading was a social activity. It took place in workshops, barns and taverns. It was almost always oral' (Darnton 1991: 166).<sup>2</sup> Sharpe's position, I want to suggest, is an indication of how deeply embedded this view of reading is – and of the tendency not to construe as reading any practice that does not lie within fairly narrowly-defined parameters.

Just how inadequate this model might be is suggested by Adrian Johns' account of the epistemological issues that confronted Robert Boyle and his colleagues at the Royal Society in the late seventeenth century. As experimental philosophers, they were developing the notion of replicability that has become 'central to the authority of modern science' (Johns 1998: 44). One might have imagined, then, that the dissemination through print of their accounts of experiments would have achieved the repetition of the

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<sup>2</sup> Darnton's more ecumenical definition of reading allows him to make connections between early modern practices and contemporary ones:

In the nineteenth century groups of artisans, especially cigar makers and tailors, took turns reading or hired a reader to keep themselves entertained while they worked. Even today many people get their news by being read to by a telecaster. Television may be less of a break with the past than is generally assumed. In any case, for most people throughout most of history, books had audiences rather than readers. They were better heard than seen (Darnton 1991: 168).

procedures described (and thus have furnished further proof of the original experiments' validity). This does not appear to have been the case:

Extensive social contact between practitioners was needed in order to reproduce cultural skills and settings in a new site. A skilled practitioner might even have to travel in person between the two locations in order for the attempted replication to succeed – or, for that matter, for it definitively to fail. It thus seems that nobody in 1660s Europe built an air-pump successfully by relying on Boyle's textual description of the engine. Some, we know, tried; all, we think, failed.

(Johns 1998: 44)

What is at stake here is not only the issue of the autonomy or self-sufficiency of the written text, but also the question of its relationship to positivist conceptions of scientific method. (The link between these two has been made more recently in the questioning of the very idea of experimental replicability [Lehrer 2010].)

What emerges from this survey is the need to reconceptualise literacy not in terms of competency or ability but rather as 'a set of cultural practices that people engage in' (Resnick 1990/2000: 28). Thus the reading that is accomplished in the classroom might need to be explored neither as a poor substitute nor as a preparation for something else (the independence of the solitary, private reader) but as a practice in its own right – or rather, as will become clear from chapter 5 onwards, as a array of interwoven but markedly different practices. To prepare for this exploration, it would be helpful to draw on ethnographic perspectives.

### 3.3 Ethnographies of reading: the New Literacy Studies

In the account above, I have sketched out something of the diversity of literate practices across time, while drawing attention to the strength of attachment to a single paradigm of reading, a paradigm that cannot adequately represent such diversity. I want to turn now to more explicitly ethnographic approaches to literacy.

One way in which an ethnographic approach to literacy has manifested itself is in the exploration of the differences between orality and literacy, and hence the consequences for individuals and societies of the acquisition of literacy. For Walter Ong (1982), orality and literacy represent something close to a simple binary opposition. Ong conceptualises the acquisition of literacy as the supersession of orality – and hence writes of readers in ‘certain subcultures [within the USA] ... still operating in a basically oral framework, performance-oriented rather than information-oriented’ (Ong 1982: 168). For individuals, literacy becomes fundamental to cognitive development: ‘writing restructures consciousness’ (Ong 1982: 77); for societies, literacy produces entirely new forms of interaction – ‘autonomous discourse’ (*ibid.*).

Empirical support for this proposition was the goal of Scribner and Cole’s research among the Vai people of West Africa (Scribner and Cole 1981). What emerged from their study of literacy practices and the cognitive effects of the acquisition of literacy was not quite so straightforward. As Goody has argued, a conception of literacy as ‘a general ability to read ... any language in any script’ (1987: 217) is inadequate in that it does not begin to pay

attention to the socio-historical situations in which particular literacies exist and are used for specific ends: it does not take account of specific literacy practices; further, to suppose that literacy, defined in such abstract terms, might have a 'direct, immediate and unmediated effect on general cognitive abilities' (1987: 218) compounds the problem of abstraction. Goody does not dismiss the possibility of cognitive effects out of hand, however; he merely suggests that such effects of particular literacy practices are likely to be found in the development of more specific cognitive skills. Doing crossword puzzles, he says, might indeed make one better at doing crossword puzzles; whether it would lead to measurable or real gains in problem-solving ability, whatever that might mean, seems altogether less likely.

Ong's reduction of orality and literacy to an either/or binary has been criticised by Goody, on the grounds that literacy does not replace orality, any more than new media technologies replace writing (Goody 2000: 109; see also Graff 1979: 302-305). Likewise, Stock (1983, 1990) argues that western European mediaeval society had salient features that were characteristic of both oral and literate culture. Stock suggests an approach that investigates 'the relationships between individuals in groups that are actually using texts for literary or social purposes, while at the same time paying close attention to the historical context of their actions as well as to consequences' (Stock 1990: 22-23). He proposes to analyse 'textual communities, which are microsocieties organized around the common understanding of a script' (*ibid.*).

Olson (1994) recognises the value of Stock's insistence on the need to attend to what actual readers did with texts, and contrasts this approach with the tendency of Eisenstein (1983) and Febvre and Martin (1958) to privilege a technological determinism. For Olson, 'reading in Charlemagne's day is somewhat similar to reading the post-modern or reader-response way – what a text means is what a reader takes it to mean' (Olson 1994: 145). Olson's characterisation of reading in the middle ages allows one to gain a quite different understanding of Menocchio, the sixteenth-century miller whose interpretation of a series of texts is revealed in the transcripts of his interrogation by the Inquisition (Ginzburg 1980). Ginzburg saw the 'aggressive individuality' (1980: 33) of Menocchio's reading as the product of the clash of oral and literate cultures. Following Stock and Olson, though, it might be more plausible to view Menocchio's approach to text as consonant with much mediaeval literate practice. What marks Menocchio's reading out, therefore – what makes it both noteworthy and (in the eyes of the Inquisition) aberrant, heterodox – was not how he construed what he read but rather whose authority he accepted. In other words, it wasn't that he didn't know how to read; it was that he used his reading politically, to challenge those in power.

Olson argues that such mediaeval ways of reading were fundamentally different from (and an obstacle to) the understanding of the autonomy of the text that arrived with, and was a product of, the Reformation – an understanding premised on a kind of literalism, which was accompanied by a shift in ways of reading the world that was a precondition of modern science:



... both cases [Reformation and the rise of scientific method] reflect a changing assessment of what was 'given' both in a text and in nature and what came to be seen as accretion, interpolation and personal interpretation of those 'texts.' Changing attitudes to texts, that is new ways of reading, allowed a sharp contrast between what the text meant and what readers traditionally had thought that it meant.  
(Olson 1994: 57)

The problem with Olson's thesis, it seems to me, is that it tends to marginalise questions of power, or positionality – as if literalism, the Protestant appeal to the words on the page as the ultimate arbiter of meaning, actually vitiated the need for interpretation. And that – interpretation as a product of the reading position – is precisely what reader-response theories, or at least some versions of reader-response, bring back into an account of reading (see below).

The work of Luria (1976), an associate of Vygotsky, is also significant here. Through a series of experiments in Uzbekistan, Luria sought to establish that the acquisition of literacy in itself brought about identifiable and generalisable cognitive gains: non-literate peasants were shown to be less able to respond appropriately to questions that demanded logical reasoning or a grasp of abstract concepts than other experimental subjects who had had some exposure to schooling, and hence to literacy. Literacy was thus taken to provide the means whereby higher mental processes were developed.

Both Luria's methods and his conclusions have been challenged. Olson (1994) insists on the need to pay attention to the interests of the participants in the experimental situation:

The general problem is one of assigning an appropriate illocutionary force to an utterance when that force is not explicitly labelled. The puzzled subject in the experiment does not know whether to take the expression as the assertion of a factual truth, a wild conjecture, a commonly held view, or a personal suggestion. The author intended that it be taken as a premise; the listener took it as an implausible conjecture. Experimenter and subject alike failed to recognize the problem as a problem of genre.

(Olson 1994: 140)

Olson's interpretation of what happened as a failure of communication helps to illuminate the different perspectives of researcher and subject, but one might wonder whether the category of genre error is quite capacious enough to encompass what is involved here. Hasan's (1999) critique of Luria is a more far-reaching one, drawing on Bernstein's code theory to insist that both schooling and literacy are inevitably inflected by the class positions of those involved in any interaction:

The child is no longer generic: differently positioned children become the concern; the adult agent of semiotic mediation is no longer culturally neutral; s/he is the voice of a distinct ideology .... Focusing simultaneously on local and official pedagogic practices, Bernstein's theorization of '*the social construction of pedagogic discourse*' (1990: 165-218) problematizes the modifier *higher* in Vygotsky's 'higher mental processes'; the essentially hierarchic nature of all knowledge, the positive and high valuation of official knowledge and the logical relations between local and official knowledge, all invite us to question the treatment of the latter as the reference point for measuring the attainment of higher mental functions (consider in this light Luria's explanation (1976) of the logical abilities of the Uzbeks). If between language and its use lies social structure, as code theory maintains, then semiotic mediation is not a neutral and innocent process; it is socio-logically sensitive to social phenomena and creates socially differentiated individual minds.

(Hasan 1999: 18-19)

The analytical categories deployed by Hasan, the relationship between 'local and official knowledge', the insistence on the impossibility of cultural neutrality on the part of the adult agent of semiotic mediation, the view of children as 'differently positioned', are of direct relevance to the significance of the work of Shirley Brice Heath, whose *Ways with Words* (1983) presents the findings of a ten-year ethnographic study of the literacy practices of different communities in the Piedmont area of the Carolinas. The two working-class communities at the centre of her study, Trackton, a black community, and Roadville, a white community, are shown to have different ways with words, to do literacy differently, both from each other and from the ways that literacy is done (and is expected to be done) in school, whereas the middle class inhabitants of Maintown have a culture that is similar to the school culture.

Brice Heath's ethnography provides a fundamental challenge to the model of literacy development as a matter of the acquisition of a set of value-free, context-independent skills. She shows that there is more than one answer to the question of what literacy is or what it is for. But there is more to *Ways with Words* than this: the different literacy practices of the different communities are used to explain the problems that the children of Roadville and Trackton, the two working-class communities, experience with the literacy of school – problems that are to do both with the difficulties faced by children who are, in effect, socialised into two incompatible literacies and with teachers' ignorance of the very existence of community literacy practices that are at variance with the school's institutionalised ways with words.

The approach to literacy as social practice has been developed by ethnographers (and others) in the past three decades. Careful attention has been paid to the diverse ways in which literacy is used, and to what indeed constitutes literacy, in different parts of the world and in a wide range of sites beyond the school, often in communities that are marginalised by and in official discourses (Barton and Hamilton 1998, Barton *et al.* 2000, Gallego and Hollingsworth 2000, Gee 1996, 2003, 2004, Gregory 1996, 2000a, 2000b, 2004, Li 2008, Prinsloo and Breier 1996, Richardson 2003, Rogoff 2001, 2003, Street 1984, 1995, 200; see also Szewd 1981). The ethnographic work of describing what people do with literacy in their homes and in community settings beyond formal schooling has, following Brice Heath, often been used as a way of problematising the assumptions of what Street (1984) has termed the 'autonomous model' of literacy – literacy as a set of skills, as cognitive, individual, context-free – and to associate this model with schooling and with the pedagogies and technologies of 'schoolled' literacy. In opposition to the autonomous model, Street proposes an 'ideological' model of literacy, where particular literacy practices are always to be seen within specific social and cultural contexts and power relations.

While acknowledging the huge gains that this challenge to the autonomous model has brought to our understanding of the real diversity of literacy practices, and of the necessarily ideological character of all such practices, I want to draw attention to two areas of difficulty within this ethnographic tradition. First, there has been a tendency to present communities and their

practices as homogenous. As Solsken (1993: 121) and Moss (2007: 48-50) have argued in relation to Brice Heath's work, such accounts may understate both the diversity of practice *within* a single community and the extent to which community members are involved in the *negotiation of different practices and values*, even when that community is relatively stable, with relatively clear boundaries separating it from other communities. (Moss points to an example within Brice Heath's own account, where two girls from Roadville are, in their conversation on the school bus, actively negotiating the different values of school and home.) The danger of a kind of essentialist fallacy becomes all the greater in settings where communities are less stable, less homogenous, where boundaries are porous and where processes of cross-cultural negotiation are an inevitable feature of everyday life.<sup>3</sup> This is, it seems to me, an issue in Gregory's representation of the literacy practices of the Bangladeshi community in Tower Hamlets (Gregory 1996), despite the fact that in her more recent work she has acknowledged the development of what she terms 'syncretic literacies' – practices emerging as the hybridisation of school and home literacies (Gregory and Williams 2000a, 2000b; Kelly *et al.* 2001; Gregory 2004).<sup>4</sup> In contrast, Jones (2004) focuses directly on the experiences of bicultural and bilingual negotiation that she has observed in adolescent readers. (It is possible, too, that the age group is significant here

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<sup>3</sup> The epilogue of the second edition of *Ways with Words* acknowledges that the effect of new technologies has been to complicate the picture of literacy practices even in the Piedmont communities where Brice Heath had conducted her research (Brice Heath 1996: 370-376).

<sup>4</sup> Chapters from Gregory (1996) and Gregory and Williams (2000a) are prescribed reading on the PGCE course on which I teach. In recent years, there have been several occasions when student teachers of Bangladeshi heritage who grew up in Tower Hamlets have contested the claim (Gregory and Williams 2000a: 175) that reading for pleasure played no part in their family literacy practices, citing memories of listening to fairy stories read to them by their parents.

– that such processes are more characteristic, or more prominent, in teenagers than in younger children.)

Second, there has been a tendency to treat the literacy practice(s) of schooling as a constant, as the already-known against which the practices of communities can be compared and contrasted. This tendency is evident in Gee (2003, 2004), for whom ‘traditional schooling’ functions largely as a convenient construct, against which can be opposed the cognitive and affective advantages of informal, out-of-school sites of learning and literacy, such as video-gaming. Li’s account draws on much more detailed knowledge of schooling; what emerges, though, is a picture of school literacy as a single, known entity, experienced within a ‘scripted, one-size-fits-all curriculum’ (Li 2008: 186) to be contrasted with the richness and diversity of wider cultural practices of the home – whether the home in question is that of white, Vietnamese or Sudanese families. For Li, as for Brice Heath, this contrast speaks of the ignorance of teachers about the home literacy practices of the students whom they teach. For Collins and Blot, on the other hand, the ideological function of schooled literacy is to be located precisely in its supersession, and hence suppression, of such heterodox alternative practices:

The advent of universal schooling did not simply replace prior nonliteracy with literacy. Instead, schooled literacy emerged out of and in response to a complex, multifaceted commonplace literacy - of workplace, church, family and politics. But schooling and schooled literacy became the norm, against which other practices and capacities are either invisible or seen and judged deficient.

(Collins and Blot 2003: 95)

Their argument is a valuable corrective to accounts that fail to acknowledge the tensions and contradictions involved in the history of schooling and of schooled literacy. And yet there are dangers in an overemphasis on structure, on the larger ideological interests at play, if what is thus neglected is the specificity of the experience of literacy acts – and the agency of those involved. It is worth bearing in mind here Linda Flower's representation of literate acts as:

... sites of construction, tension, divergence, and conflict. They happen at the intersection of diverse goals, values and assumptions, where social roles interact with personal images of one's self and one's situation, where individual rhetorical agendas mix with highly conventional practices. ... literate acts are often sites of negotiation where the meaning that emerges may reflect resolution, abiding contradiction, or perhaps just a temporary stay against uncertainty.

(Flower 1994: 19)

Within the New Literacy Studies, relatively little attention has been paid to the literacy practice(s) to be found within mainstream schooling. The tendency has been to assume that these practices are already known, and indeed part of the point of the focus of New Literacy Studies on other sites of literacy had been to insist on the inadequacy of a view of literacy that treats it as coterminous with schooling. There are, however, significant exceptions to this general neglect. In the United States, Anne Haas Dyson (1997, 2003) has written extensively on classrooms where literacy is conceptualised – and practised – as dialogic, social, inextricably related to the out-of-school cultures of the students. In the UK, Gemma Moss (2007) has used ethnographic approaches to demonstrate the variability of literacy practices in different primary classrooms.

I first read Brice Heath's work when I was doing my PGCE (1984-5); I returned to it when I started to write about teaching Shakespeare in a London comprehensive school (Yandell 1997a). What impressed me was, in part, the 'thick description' (Ryle, cited in Geertz 1973) of literacy events, the attention that Brice Heath paid to what people actually did with texts. It mattered, too, that the ethnography was presented as an intervention in a debate about pedagogy: what were the implications of these observable differences in literacy practice for any teacher, and particularly for teachers working in schools where students were likely to occupy different positions in relation to culture, literacy and learning?

I suspect, though, that there was an aspect of my reading of *Ways with Words* that was against the grain. Brice Heath's account of the literacy practices of Trackton excited me because, for all its specificity, it articulated something about my own practice, and about my sense of how literacy was done in other London classrooms: it made it possible for me to begin thinking about those aspects of school literacy that tended to remain unnoticed, unexplored, untheorised. In Trackton, literacy is seldom a solitary pursuit. Meanings are negotiated socially, in dialogue around the text: no-one assumes that meanings are self-evident, or that texts speak for themselves:

For Trackton adults, reading is a social activity; when something is read in Trackton, it almost always provokes narratives, jokes, sidetracking talk, and active negotiation of the meaning of written texts among the listeners. Authority in the written word does not rest in the words themselves, but in



the meanings which are negotiated through the experiences of the group.

(Brice Heath 1983: 196)

Reading is, to all intents and purposes, inseparable from talk. Reading in Trackton thus looks a lot like reading in ancient Jewish culture (Boyarin 1993, above) and it has much in common with the meaning of the Old English words *raed* and *raedan* (Howe 1993, above). And it looks rather like the reading that I have observed and participated in over the past three decades in secondary English classrooms in London schools – the reading which is explored in chapters 5 to 11 (below).

Such a paradigm of reading also takes us back to John Milton and his denial of a neat separation of production and consumption, of writer and reader or of the activities of writing and reading. I want to turn now to how literacy practices are represented in the more limited field of literature and the reading of literature.

### 3.4 Different readers, different reading: from Milton to Wordsworth

In the magnificent opening of Book VII of *Paradise Lost*, Milton positions himself combatively in relation to classical literary traditions and conventions:

Descend from heaven, Urania, by that name  
If rightly thou art called, whose voice divine  
Following, above the Olympian hill I soar,  
Above the flight of Pegasean wing.  
The meaning, not the name I call: for thou  
Nor of the Muses nine, nor on the top  
Of old Olympus dwell'st, but heavenly born,  
Before the hills appeared, or fountain flowed,  
Thou with eternal Wisdom didst converse,  
Wisdom thy sister, and with her didst play

In presence of the almighty father, pleased  
With thy celestial song.

(Milton 1971: 356-7)

Milton simultaneously draws on Graeco-Roman classical traditions and rejects them. His Muse is named as Urania, and yet he is at pains to explain that this name is, in effect, provisional ('If rightly thou art called'), and that he certainly does not mean the same thing by this as might have been meant by classical poets. Here, as elsewhere, he uses both the forms of classical poetry and the web of allusions that the tradition has given him, but insists on a different – explicitly Christian – perspective. Milton's 'heavenly born' Urania is not to be confused with one of the nine muses who hung out 'on the top/Of old Olympus.'

But Milton also positions himself within a specific political (and deeply personal) history. As he moves to the terrestrial second half of his epic, he refers to the moment at which he is writing, to the defeat of the revolution of which he had been the foremost propagandist, to the threat of persecution that he faces, and also to his own blindness:

More safe I sing with mortal voice, unchanged  
To hoarse or mute, though fallen on evil days,  
On evil days though fallen, and evil tongues;  
In darkness, and with dangers compassed round,  
And solitude.

(Milton 1971: 358-9)

Milton's invocation of his muse is no mere imitation of a classical trope, and certainly no indication of a retreat, either literary or spiritual, from present realities; rather it is central to the political project of *Paradise Lost*, a project that insists on the intersection of the particular and the universal. In the lines quoted above, Milton offers an image of the writer as lonely seer – a model of

writing and the writer which is powerfully embedded in western cultural assumptions about the nature of literary production – but then emphatically rejects this notion of the writer's isolation:

And solitude; yet not alone, while thou  
Visit'st my slumbers nightly, or when morn  
Purples the east: still govern thou my song,  
Urania, and fit audience find, though few.

(Milton 1971: 359)

The significance of this is not that the poet is saved from loneliness by the visitations of his muse. What Milton insists on here is a direct link between the act of writing and the audience for whom he writes, while the terms in which he conceptualises both his poetry ('song') and his readership ('audience') simply do not entertain any absolute separation of oral and written language, nor do they imply a model of reading as private, solitary or individual. And if Urania is responsible both for the production of the epic and for its consumption – not only the source of inspiration but also charged with the task of finding the 'fit audience ... though few' – this opening section of Book VII serves not only to reconstruct the project of the epic but also to indicate the attitudes and attributes expected of the audience. Milton is thus not only positioning himself but also constructing his readers. What he demands of them is not merely knowledge of classical literary tradition (the 'old Olympus'), nor even a shared set of religious beliefs (Urania's 'celestial song'), but also a shared understanding of and orientation towards contemporary political experiences (these 'evil days').

I want to compare Milton's construction of his readers with the reader who is constituted by the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* (Wordsworth and Coleridge 1800):

I have one request to make of my Reader, which is, that in judging these Poems he would decide by his own feelings genuinely, and not by reflection upon what will probably be the judgment of others. How common is it to hear a person say, 'I myself do not object to this style of composition or this or that expression, but to such and such classes of people it will appear mean or ludicrous.' This mode of criticism so destructive of all sound unadulterated judgment is almost universal: I have therefore to request that the Reader would abide independently by his own feelings, and that if he finds himself affected he would not suffer such conjectures to interfere with his pleasure.

(Wordsworth and Coleridge 1800: xli-xlii)

In little over a hundred years, the relationship between text and reader has changed beyond recognition. Here, explicitly and unmistakably, the reader is configured as singular: sound judgements are made by individual readers, reading alone. When their views are influenced by others, this is a process of adulteration; when others' opinions are considered, even when they become a matter of speculation, this impedes the proper process of judgement – and hence, presumably, of reading itself. The clear demand on the reader is to 'abide independently by his own feelings': response is located in the individual, and authentic responses, given the emphasis on 'feelings', are visceral rather than noetic.

What is presented here is a model of reading that is entirely compatible with that which underpins the National Curriculum. Independence is prized as a primary attribute of the reader, and pleasure is both an appropriate purpose and a desirable outcome. The National Curriculum's promotion of 'discriminating' readers is present here, too, in a version that suggests something of the commodification of literature:

From what has been said, and from a perusal of the Poems, the Reader will be able clearly to perceive the object which I have proposed to myself: he will determine how far I have attained this object; and, what is a much more important question, whether it be worth attaining; and upon the decision of these two questions will rest my claim to the approbation of the public.

(Wordsworth and Coleridge 1800: xlvi)

Marks will be awarded, it would appear, for poems that do exactly what it says on the tin. For Milton, the question of value does not arise, at least not explicitly: what validates *Paradise Lost* is not, in any recognisable sense, a matter of literary quality – and that is the whole point of the dismissive rejection of ‘old Olympus’. For Wordsworth, on the other hand, what is being produced and offered to individual consumers – buyers as well as readers, indeed readers because they are buyers – has to assert its value in the marketplace. This leads, inevitably, into a consideration of the criteria that should underpin the judgements of literary value. If the reader is to be discriminating, what is the basis of his discrimination? Wordsworth’s answer to this shows an awareness of the contradictions entailed in his emphasis on the individuality of the reader, since if all readers are to judge what they read on the basis of their own feelings, without reference to the views of others, can any more objective criteria be adduced? Yes, says Wordsworth:

... for an *accurate* taste in Poetry and in all the other arts, as Sir Joshua Reynolds has observed, is an *acquired* talent, which can only be produced by thought and a long continued intercourse with the best models of composition.

(Wordsworth and Coleridge 1800: xlii-xliii)

In itself, then, the ‘foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart’ is not up to the job. For the reader to gain the capacity to judge, to discriminate, requires practice: taste is acquired by reading other texts, and in particular other texts that are

themselves of high quality. The answer may beg other questions (who, for example, is to determine which other texts afford 'the best models of composition'?) but it is precisely the answer that lies behind the National Curriculum's attachment to 'reading a wide range of texts' and to the promulgation of a canon. I will return to this point. It is worth noting, however, that Wordsworth's model of development in reading is also echoed in the National Curriculum. If accurate judgement is to be acquired through long acquaintance with the best models,

This is mentioned not with so ridiculous a purpose as to prevent the most inexperienced Reader from judging for himself, (I have already said that I wish him to judge for himself;) but merely to temper the rashness of decision, and to suggest that if Poetry be a subject on which much time has not been bestowed, the judgment may be erroneous, and that in many cases it necessarily will be so.

(Wordsworth and Coleridge 1800: xliii)

One can see in this a foreshadowing of the National Curriculum's prescription that, even within Key Stage 1, children should read texts and 'say why they like them or do not like them'. On the face of it, such a practice appears to cede to the reader the power of judgement: in the open market of texts, the reader-as-customer is king. Below the surface, though, lurks the question of taste. Some opinions are more valid than others. In emphasising the dangers of erroneous judgements, and the importance of the acquisition of (the right kind of) reading experience, Wordsworth foreshadows the paradigm of reading and reading development that has remained dominant for the past two centuries. As Ian Reid has argued, 'much Romantic literature was itself already articulating a quasi-pedagogical strategy and prefiguring the conditions for its own reading' (Reid 2004: 95). Reid draws specific attention to the abiding influence of Wordsworth's 'Immortality Ode' in 'picturing

children as full of innate brilliance which fades when they become socialized' (*ibid.*: 96). There are, thus, in this Romantic version of what reading is and what it is for, the seeds of the Arnoldian project, in which literature (culture) is counterposed to material existence and in which the function of literature is the inculcation of value in the individual.

This view of the function of literature is also inseparable from issues of taste, of judgement or discrimination. Reading (literature) is the means whereby taste/judgement is acquired, and also how reading – and hence the reader – is to be assessed. Good readers, discriminating readers, are able to judge the value of a text, and are able to talk (and write) about a text in ways that demonstrate their worth by showing their knowledge of the text's worth. On current examination papers, questions that invite candidates to write about the success of a text and about how the writer has achieved particular effects are traceable back through Leavis and Arnold to Wordsworth. The issue of students' responses to texts and how these responses are (and might be) assessed, is one that I return to in chapters 7, 10 and 11 (below).

### 3.5 Literary Theory

Running alongside arguments about literacy (or literacies) have been debates more specifically concerned with literary texts. As the exploration of Milton and Wordsworth indicates, these debates have been both about how texts are to be read and about what texts are to be read – about values and about canons. What I want to focus on here is not some potted history of literary theory but rather an account of the ways in literary theories have constructed different accounts of reading and readers.

#### 3.5.1 *Reception theory: Iser and Jauss*

What Iser does, first and foremost, is to insist that it is worth focusing on the reader's role:

So long as the focal point of interest was the author's intention, or the contemporary, psychological, social, or historical meaning of the text, or the way in which it was constructed, it scarcely seemed to occur to critics that the text could only have a meaning when it was read.

(Iser 1978: 20)

Iser represents the reading process as an interaction between text and reader, and hence arrives at the conclusion that 'The meaning of a literary text is not a definable entity but ... a dynamic happening' (*ibid.*: 22).

What is most helpful here is the emphasis on reading as a process. What Iser grapples with, then, is partly the issue of what is meant by the reader of a text. He distinguishes between three

types of 'contemporary reader' – the one real and historical, drawn from existing documents, and the other two hypothetical: the first constructed from social and historical knowledge of the time, and the second extrapolated from the reader's role laid down in the text.



(Iser 1978: 28)

On the other hand, there is the figure of the ideal reader who

unlike the contemporary reader, is a purely fictional being; he has no basis in reality, and it is this very fact that makes him so useful: as a fictional being, he can close the gaps that constantly appear in any analysis of literary effects and responses.

(Iser 1978: 29)

The problem with both contemporary reader and ideal reader, for Iser, lies in the fact that as constructs they divert attention away from the text – producing an exclusive concentration on the results produced rather than the structure of effects which causes such results. Since the latter is what he is really interested in, Iser tends to turn his back on the messy realities of real readers:

If, then, we are to try and understand the effects caused and the responses elicited by literary works, we must allow for the reader's presence without in any way predetermining his character or his historical situation. We may call him, for want of a better term, the implied reader.

(Iser 1978: 34)

Iser also conceptualises the act of reading as 'basically a kind of dyadic interaction' (*ibid.*: 66). This, it seems to me, is the crux of the problem. It positions reading as the interaction of a (single) text with a (single) reader, and thus remains closer to the New Critical approach than Iser might at first appear. Light is to be shed on the reading process by an examination of the individual text and the (imagined?) reader. What gets left out of this account is any notion of the contexts within which reading occurs – contexts which shape, inform and inflect the reading. (Extratextual reality is allowed in – but only to the extent that it is referred to or immanent in the text.) And reading as a collaborative or collective act is not entertained.

Moreover, insofar as Iser conceptualises readers as different, it would appear that these differences are to be imagined as points on a linear scale, or perhaps on several different linear scales – more or less approximating to maximal/ideal performance:

The degree to which the retaining mind will implement the perspective connections inherent in the text depends on a large number of subjective factors: memory, interest, attention, and mental capacity all affect the extent to which past contexts become present. There is no doubt that this extent will vary considerably from reader to reader ....

(*ibid.*: 118)

Iser goes as far as to suggest that the proper province of literary theory, which he takes to be the theory of literary effect produced through ‘the intersubjective structure of meaning-production’, is, in effect, the text; on the other hand, he sees an interest in readers, and hence a theory of reception (the significance ascribed to meaning) as ‘more sociological than literary’ (*ibid.*: 151).

Though there is much common ground between Iser and Jauss, the latter makes a crucial move in insisting on the historical specificity of the act of reading. Because he theorises reading as necessarily happening in history, his understanding of literature is also historicised:

A literary work is not an object that stands by itself and that offers the same view to each reader in each period. It is not a monument that monologically reveals its timeless essence. It is much more like an orchestration that strikes ever new resonances among its readers and that frees the text from the material of the words and brings it to a contemporary existence ....

(Jauss 1982: 21)

By placing texts and readers in history, Jauss makes two decisive breaks with Iser. First, texts are no longer to be understood in themselves but intertextually, in relation to other texts. Second, the historicity of the reading position means that different readings are not, as Iser would have it, better or worse, approximations to some Platonic ideal, but rather interpretations made in, and appropriate to, the historical circumstances of the reader.

As Nelms observes, there is a sense in which (school-) teachers 'have always had to be reader-response critics' (Nelms 1988: 3): we have always been interested in what our students made of the texts we read with them, always interested in the active construction of meanings in and around the reading process. Louise Rosenblatt's work (1938, 1978) is testimony to the longevity of this interest, at the same time that her emphasis has tended to be on the interaction of text and individual reader. This approach, typified by her assertion that 'The reader brings to the work personality traits, memories of past events, present needs and preoccupations, a particular mood of the moment, and a particular physical condition' (Rosenblatt 1938: 30), is informed by an unresolved tension in her model of the relationship between the individual and society. 'Language,' she asserts, 'is socially evolved, but it is always constituted by individuals, with their particular histories' (*ibid.*: 25). Agency, in this model, lies with individuals, who remain oddly abstracted from the social: Rosenblatt's theory, for all its acknowledgement of history and of wider social forces, does not challenge the paradigm of the individual reader, whose transactions with the text are too personal, too idiosyncratic, to be easily related to larger cultural movements. This individualistic tendency in the dominant strand of reader-response theory is often expressed as the goal

towards which the reading experiences of the classroom should lead. In the NCTE-published collection of essays from which I quoted at the start of this paragraph, the orientation is made explicit in the conclusion to Early and Ericson's paper: 'For all students, the ultimate goal must be: "I can read it myself – and I will!"' (Early and Ericson 1988: 42).

In direct contrast to Rosenblatt's individualist paradigm is Stanley Fish's notion of a community of readers that limits the free play of interpretation (Fish 1980). What Fish means by an interpretive community, however, is a very particular subsection of society: those readers within the academy. And when one sees Fish putting reception theory to work in his readings of real texts, it becomes apparent that the interpretive community is even smaller and more select than one might have imagined – closer to Iser's ideal reader and, by a happy coincidence, closely aligned with Fish himself (see, for example, Fish 1967, 1972 and also Eagleton 1996). The historical contingency of such readings remains largely unacknowledged; where it is mentioned, its significance is diminished (Fish 1995).

### *3.5.2 Other readers: representation, reading and canonicity*

What is missing from such accounts is any systematic attention to readers as historically situated – and to the otherness of other readers (Eagleton 1996). That, in the present argument, is the significance of feminist and postcolonial literary theory.

For Jean-Paul Sartre:

... the operation of writing implies that of reading as its dialectical correlative and these two connected acts

necessitate two distinct agents. It is the joint effort of author and reader which brings upon the scene the concrete and imaginary object which is the work of the mind. There is no art except for and by others.

(Sartre 1948/2001: 31)

Sartre rejected outright any assumption that the act of reading was informed by universally shared values, using Richard Wright's *Black Boy* to exemplify the possibility of a text written both for white liberals, but also for, as well as on behalf of, Black people (*ibid.*: 58-61).

It is that 'on behalf of' that became a focus of attention, particularly from the 1960s through to the 1980s, when I started my teaching career. My early years as a teacher coincided with a period of fundamental change in the English curriculum, particularly in relation to the teaching of literature and particularly in London, where I worked.<sup>5</sup> Whereas the past two decades have been a time of centrally-imposed change from above, the preceding decades saw change from below, change that was responsive to social movements and to school students themselves: change that was motivated, primarily, by taking seriously questions of representation. In the classrooms such as those where I worked, classrooms that were constituted in diversity, both the senses of representation teased out by Spivak (1988), the cultural and the political, were centrally and inextricably implicated: this was both about acts of *sign-making* (re-presentation) and about *speaking for*. So we chose writers whose work represented something of working-class experience (Barry Hines, Alan Sillitoe, Alan Bleasdale, Shelagh Delaney); we chose African and Caribbean (Chinua Achebe, Sam Selvon, V.S. Reid, Buchi

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<sup>5</sup> The following brief sketch of the recent history of literature teaching in secondary schools first appeared in Turvey and Yandell (2011: 152-54).

Emecheta), and Black American (Angela Walker, Maya Angelou, Rosa Guy, Mildred Taylor) writers; we chose writers who were attempting to speak to the experiences of contemporary British urban youth (Farukh Dhondy, Jan Needle, Geraldine Kaye). What was at stake here was more than a rebalancing of the canon, to make it less male or more up-to-date, to give it a postcolonial or a proletarian flavour. The category of literature itself was problematised, in two important ways. First, our work as English teachers took seriously Raymond Williams' insistence that 'culture is ordinary' (Williams 1958). The 1970s and 1980s was a period in which community publishing flourished and its fruits, largely in the form of autobiography and poetry, figured prominently in English classrooms. Allied to this was the tradition of publication of school students' own work, from Chris Searle's editions of *Stepney Words* (1971) to the steady stream of anthologies produced by the Inner London Education Authority's English Centre, such as *Our Lives* (Ashton and Simons 1979), *City Lines* (Simons *et al.* 1982), *Say What You Think* (Moger and Richmond 1985). The presence of such collections and community publications in the classroom had the effect of blurring the boundaries of literature; it also acted as a powerful reminder of the cultural productivity of school students and the communities from which they came. Second, there was an overtly political dimension to some of the texts that we chose to read with our classes: the selection of Beverley Naidoo's (1985) *Journey to Jo'burg*, for example, could not be seen as entirely separable from a shared set of commitments to the struggle against apartheid (see chapter 6, below).

To some extent, these changes in what was read reflected teachers' shifting conceptions of the processes and purposes of reading. There was a widespread recognition of the significance of students' interests – of what they brought to the reading that happened in classrooms – and, perhaps, of the validity of diverse reading positions. There was, too, a shared understanding that literacy involved reading the world as well as the word (Freire and Macedo 1987), and hence that encounters with literature were never simply a matter of induction into an academic discourse. But it might be legitimate to ask whether the arguments about which text to read left unexamined how these texts were read, or whose readings (really) counted.

What has happened in England in the past two decades is that the experience of literature in the classroom has been fundamentally reconfigured. In part, the effect of the imposition of a national curriculum has been the reassertion of canonicity, both of a prescribed list of canonical authors and of a predetermined notion of literary value. This process is most apparent in the fact that, since 1989, the proposition that all secondary students should study Shakespeare has been given statutory force. It is not simply about the return of dead white men, but also about the curricularisation, the institutionalisation, of the Other. Literature, in every version of the National Curriculum thus far, has been constructed as a double category. On the one hand, there is the 'English literary heritage', with its list of canonical authors from Chaucer to Tennyson (QCDA 2009). The list, with its startling anomalies (in what sense are either Kate Chopin or Oscar Wilde representative of a specifically 'English' literary heritage?), has statutory

force. On the other hand, there are 'texts from different cultures and traditions' (QCDA 2009). These texts – and their authors – are thus defined by their difference, by their categorical separation from the 'English' canonical authors. In relation to the 'English literary heritage', the correct readerly attitude is one of reverence: pupils should be enabled to 'understand the appeal and importance over time' of these texts (*ibid.*). For the texts from 'different cultures', however, different criteria are in operation. There is a requirement that the authors 'are so familiar with a particular culture or country that they represent it sensitively and with understanding' (*ibid.*): thus policy, at a stroke, insists on a one-for-one correlation between culture and nation, and by extension nationality, and assumes a particular relationship between the writer and the culture that is represented. For the readers of such 'different' texts, on the other hand, much greater latitude is envisaged: they are to explore 'how ideas, experiences and values are portrayed differently in texts from a range of cultures and traditions' (*ibid.*). The marking out of literary territory in this way, the creation of lines of demarcation, enforces messages about texts (how they should be categorised and hence how they should be read) and also about readers and their cultural positioning. These divisions are marked most conspicuously in the exam board anthologies that almost all fifteen- and sixteen-year-olds study. There are sections devoted to poetry labelled 'English Literature', and a separate section entitled 'Poetry from Different Cultures'. These institutional messages are in tension with the anthologised poems themselves, many of which, like John Agard's 'Half Caste', represent complex struggles of intercultural negotiation. In London classrooms, the assumption of a



monocultural, hegemonic norm, the perspective from which cultural difference is to be approached, is nothing short of absurd.

The second strand in the process of the repositioning of literature has been the renewed emphasis on a skills-based approach to the curriculum.

Particularly in the past decade or so, with the advent of the National Literacy Strategy (DfEE 2001), texts have tended to become merely exemplary: drained of all particularity, all local significance, they are presented as vehicles for the teaching of generic devices. (I return to the influence of policy on the texts that are read, and how they are read, in the first part of chapter 6, below.)

### 3.5.3 *To Tehran and back again: texts and value(s) in the English classroom*<sup>6</sup>

I want to turn now to this question of representation in and through literature in a more recent version of the argument, one that was played out around Azar Nafisi's (2003) *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A memoir in books*. Nafisi's memoir, which also functions as literary criticism and a social history of post-revolutionary Iran, centres on the reading group which she established with seven of her former students. It has been a publishing sensation, staying for over 117 weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list, translated into 32 languages, and garnering critical acclaim from Susan Sontag and Margaret Atwood (<http://www.barclayagency.com/nafisi.html>, accessed 17 January 2009). Indeed, Nafisi does not lack friends in high places. Among those

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<sup>6</sup> A version of this section was presented as a paper to the London English Research Group, convened by Peter Medway and John Hardcastle, in January 2010.

named in the acknowledgements is 'Bernard Lewis (who opened the door)' (2003: 346); Lewis, adviser to US Vice-President Dick Cheney and coiner of the phrase 'clash of civilizations', reciprocated by providing a blurb for

*Reading Lolita:*

A memoir about teaching western literature in revolutionary Iran, with profound and fascinating insights into both. A masterpiece.

(Lewis, in Nafisi 2003: back cover)

Also mentioned, though more coyly, in the acknowledgements, is 'Paul' – widely believed to be Paul Wolfowitz, formerly Bush's Deputy Secretary of Defence and architect of the Iraq war.

It is easy to see why the book has been so popular, and not only among the most hawkish of the neocons. A rallying cry for reading groups everywhere, it takes literature seriously, and it makes large claims for the civilising power of a Western literary canon in particular. I shall return later to the substance of those claims, but first I want to draw attention to the main lines of adverse critical reaction to the book. In *Jasmine and Stars: Reading More Than Lolita in Tehran* (2007), Fatemeh Keshavarz provides a sustained critique both of Nafisi's account of life in Iran after the revolution and of Nafisi's neglect of Persian literature, her almost exclusive focus on a Western canon. In an analysis that draws on Said (1978), Keshavarz sees Nafisi as the most prominent of the New Orientalists responsible for the production of a discourse that privileges western values and culture:

More importantly, it replicates the totalizing – and silencing – tendencies of the old Orientalists by virtue of erasing, through unnuanced narration, the complexity and richness in the local culture.

(Keshavarz 2007a: 3)

The difference, of course, is that the old Orientalism was purveyed by Europeans (philologists, historians, anthropologists and so on), whereas the New Orientalism is produced by an indigenous class of 'comprador intellectuals' (Dabashi 2006b).

Dabashi accuses Nafisi of 'promoting the racist cause of a singular literary canon':

The narrative eradication of Persian literature and Iranian culture while writing in an entirely Iranian context mutates into a more global dismissal of world literatures at large, any literature or culture that might ... pose an element of resistance to imperial designs and their ideological foregrounding.

...

The major problem with *Reading Lolita in Tehran* in fact lies not in its systematic distortion of Iranian literary and social history but even more importantly in how utterly ignorant (indifferent or dismissive) of the massive debates of a counter-culture movement in the US academy, briefly code-named multiculturalism, Nafisi has been ....

(Dabashi 2006a)

What seems to me to be rather limited about this debate is highlighted by Dabashi's reference to multiculturalism. The argument might have been given added vigour by the supporting cast of hawks and neocons and the very real possibility of Iran being the next target of their War on Terror, but its framing is essentially that of the old theory wars, and its battlefield is the canon, or rather, the canons – Western literature versus Persian/postcolonial literature. In this debate, too, there is a particular edge because of the extent to which both the senses of representation teased out by Spivak (1988), the cultural and the political, are centrally and inextricably implicated: this is both about acts of *sign-making* (re-presentation) and about *speaking for*.

These are important questions, as Robert Scholes has insisted:

Understanding the category of literature as a problem - and a problem with a history - is part of what every serious student of English should know.

...

As a discipline, English needs both the cool rigor of theory and a passionate commitment to particular texts and ideas. Even as individual readers, we need them both. The political enters the study of English primarily through questions of representation: who is represented, who does the representing, who is object, who is subject - and how do these representations connect to the values of groups, communities, classes, tribes, sects, and nations?

(Scholes 1998: 151, 153)

Scholes is right to assert the propriety of such debates. But even in his attentiveness to the necessarily problematic category of literature, what tends to get left out of the picture is how these texts are read, and what kind of theory underpins these readings.

It is to this that I now want to turn, by focusing on one episode in *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, in which Nafisi recounts her experiences of teaching *The Great Gatsby* to a class in the University of Tehran, between November 1980 and January 1981 (Nafisi 2003: 108). The date matters to the extent that Nafisi was newly-appointed – and also that the context is that of the immediate aftermath of the revolution, when different intellectual and political currents, Marxist as well as Islamist, were engaged in heated debate. Before embarking on Fitzgerald, the class had been reading short stories by Gorky and Mike Gold, from whose essay, 'Towards Proletarian Art' (1929), Nafisi quotes:

*Art is no longer snobbish or cowardly. It teaches peasants to use tractors, gives lyrics to young soldiers, designs textiles for factory women's dresses, writes burlesques for factory*

*theatres, does a hundred other useful tasks. Art is useful as bread.*

(Nafisi 2003: 107 [italics in the original])

For Nafisi, the point of *Gatsby* is precisely its irrelevance – ‘a strange choice to teach at a university where almost all the students were burning with revolutionary zeal’ (ibid: 108). *Gatsby* represents a commitment to the aesthetic, to the unfettered realm of the imagination, in opposition to Gold’s instrumental view of (revolutionary) art and, equally in opposition to the student in Nafisi’s class:

Mr Nyazi’s hand darted up. ‘We don’t have time for love right now,’ he said. ‘We are committed to a higher, more sacred love.’

(Nafisi 2003: 110)

Nafisi recalls that outside the university loudspeakers were broadcasting ‘Death to America!’ while inside her classroom students were expected to discuss the American dream. There is nothing necessarily incongruous about this juxtaposition, though: what creates the incongruity is Nafisi’s insistence on a particular way of reading, her insistence on a kind of ideological innocence:

A novel is not an allegory, I said as the period was about to come to an end. It is the sensual experience of another world. If you don’t enter that world, hold your breath with the characters and become involved in their destiny, you won’t be able to empathize, and empathy is at the heart of the novel. This is how you read a novel: you inhale the experience. So start breathing. I just want you to remember this. That is all: class dismissed.

(*ibid.*: 111)

There is here a fundamental contradiction in Nafisi’s model of the reading process itself. At the same time as she insists on the free play of the imagination – on the uselessness of art, its untethered status, and hence on the space it offers for the reader to move beyond the confines of the reader’s

world – the model she proposes amounts to a denial of reading position, readerly identity. It's worth dwelling on two overlapping implications of this approach. First, it is a profoundly ideological model – a form of liberal humanist empiricism that conceals its own authoritarianism: to take a novel on its own terms, as Nafisi prescribes, is to leave oneself out of the picture. Second, it is a grossly reductive model, one that transforms the binary relationship of text and reader into an impossible unity. Instead of the death of the author, what we have here is the death of the reader – caught in the injunction to 'hold your breath': empathy is thus the denial of the self.

In any case, though, it won't quite do to explain the process of reading a novel as inhaling the experience. One of the reasons that I am interested in Nafisi's memoir is that it is rather more about teaching *Lolita*, or *Gatsby*, in Tehran than about reading: in other words, it is about particular forms of reading – the collective readings that emerge in the classroom. And Nafisi's injunction to 'inhale the experience' doesn't quite account for her own mediating presence. Again, there is a contradiction here: students are told to take the novel on its own terms, but these terms are dictated by their teacher.

As John Frow has argued:

... it is precisely this assumption of a set of uniform criteria, or of a uniform hierarchy of criteria, that has played the major organizing role in the most authoritative and entrenched practices of reading - with the inevitable effect of repressing the difference and the specificity of other practices, casting them as naive or exotic or perverse.

(Frow 1995: 132)

So Nafisi imagines the conversation she would like to have with Mr Bahri, another of her students:

Be careful with your dreams; one day they may just come true. I could have told him to learn from Gatsby ....

(Nafisi 2003: 114)

When Nafisi is accosted, outside the library, by another student in the class, we learn that Mr Nyazi has been learning the wrong lessons from Gatsby:

Surely I could see, he insisted, that these novels and their characters became our models in real life? Maybe Mr Gatsby was all right for the Americans, but not for our revolutionary youth. ... There was, for Mr Nyazi, no difference between the fiction of Fitzgerald and the facts of his own life. *The Great Gatsby* was representative of things American, and America was poison for us; it certainly was. We should teach Iranian students to fight against American immorality, he said. He looked earnest; he had come to me in all goodwill.

(Nafisi 2003: 120)

So Nafisi has the idea of putting the book on trial. Nyazi will act as prosecutor, another student, Zarrin, will defend, and Nafisi herself is to appear as the defendant – the novel. The trial is represented in the book as an absurdity, an inversion of the natural order of the classroom, at the same time as it is an important set-piece in Nafisi's argument for a particular way of reading the canon of western literature:

This after all was not merely a defense of *Gatsby* but of a whole way of looking at and appraising literature – and reality, for that matter. Bijan [Nafisi's husband], who seemed quite amused by all of this, told me one day that I was studying *Gatsby* with the same intensity as a lawyer scrutinising a textbook on law. I turned to him and said, You don't take this seriously, do you? He said, Of course I take it seriously. You have put yourself in a vulnerable position in relation to your students. You have allowed them – no, not just that; you have forced them into questioning your judgement as a teacher. So you have to win this case. This is very important for a junior member of the faculty in her first semester of teaching.

(*ibid.*: 122)

The authority of the canon is thus not separable from the authority of the teacher: the challenge to one is a challenge to the other.

Nyazi's main line of attack is that the novel perpetrates 'a rape of our culture':

'The book preaches illicit relations between a man and woman ... The only sympathetic person here is the cuckolded husband, Mr Wilson .... When he kills Gatsby, it is the hand of God. He is the only victim. He is the genuine symbol of the oppressed, in the land of, of, of the Great Satan!'

...  
'The only good thing about this book ... is that it exposes the immorality and decadence of American society, but we have fought to rid ourselves of this trash and it is high time that such books be banned.'

(*ibid.*: 126-127)

Zarrin, defending, argues that Nyazi 'can no longer distinguish fiction from reality':

'He has demonstrated his own weakness: an inability to read a novel on its own terms. All he knows is judgment, crude and simplistic exaltation of right and wrong.' Mr Nyazi raised his head at these words, turning a deep red, but he said nothing. 'But is a novel good,' continued Zarrin, addressing the class, 'because the heroine is virtuous? Is it bad if its character strays from the moral Mr Nyazi insists in imposing not only on us but on all fiction?'

(*ibid.*: 128)

And then Zarrin interrogates Nafisi, in role as the defendant, *Gatsby*, asking her to confirm that her aim had not been a defence of the wealthy classes:

'If a critique of carelessness is a fault,' I said, somewhat self-consciously, 'then at least I'm in good company. This carelessness, a lack of empathy, appears in Jane Austen's negative characters: in Lady Catherine, in Mrs Norris, in Mr Collins or the Crawfords. The theme recurs in Henry James's stories and in Nabokov's monster heroes .... Imagination in these works is equated with empathy; we can't experience all that others have gone through, but we can understand even the most monstrous individuals in works of fiction. ... Empathy lies at the heart of *Gatsby*, like so many other great novels – the biggest sin is to be blind to others' problems and pains. Not seeing them means denying their existence.' I said all this in one breath, rather astonished at my own fervor.

(*ibid.*: 132)



Nafisi here seems to me to be indulging in a fairly outrageous display of having her cake and eating it. Like some latter-day Atticus Finch, she extols empathy as the cardinal readerly virtue, at the same time as she displays a singular lack of empathy for any of her own students who dares to adopt a different reading position. Her reading – the approved reading – amounts to a rejection of particularity: if an equals sign can be placed between Tom and Daisy, Mr Collins, the Crawfords, and so on, then no great attention need be paid to the representation of any of them as characters in historically specific, situated relationships. Great literature, it would appear, is all pretty much interchangeable, each work singing from the same moral hymn-sheet, and a pretty dull moral it is, too. (And as for the claim that novels function democratically, dispensing to each character the twin gifts of complexity and a voice, Nafisi would only have to read E.M. Forster (1927/1962), hardly the new kid on the block when it comes to ways of engaging with bourgeois fiction, to encounter the distinction between round and flat characters.)

There is an ironic distance between the title of Nafisi's memoir and her insistence on the universally applicable ethical values of the western canon. If western literature is the repository of transcendent meaning, and hence the task of the reader is merely to identify (and assent to) this pre-existing meaning, there can be no particular significance to reading *Lolita*, or anything else, in Tehran. She might as well be in Toronto or Texas – the only things that might be different would be the locally-inflected misreadings (and, I suppose, the noises off: chants of 'Death to America!' are more likely in Baghdad than in Baltimore).

Contesting Ricoeur's binary opposition between the circumstantial reality of speech and the untethered nature of texts, Edward Said insisted on the situatedness of the text, and hence the situatedness of any reading of the text:

It is not only that any text, if it is not immediately destroyed, is a network of often colliding forces, but also that a text in its actually *being* a text is a being in the world; it therefore addresses anyone who reads ....

The point is that texts have ways of existing that even in their most rarefied form are always enmeshed in circumstance, time, place, and society - in short, they are in the world, and hence worldly.

(Said 1984: 33, 35)

Readings are accomplished – and hence meanings are made – by people in history, in the world. To acknowledge this has consequences both for the concept of literary/aesthetic value and for pedagogy. 'Never trust the teller, trust the tale,' cautioned D. H. Lawrence. Whatever Nafisi's model of reading might be, whatever her intentions in staging the trial of the Islamic Republic of Iran versus *The Great Gatsby*, whatever her interests in representing the student-participants in the trial in such partial terms, the episode offers the possibility of an alternative approach to literature in the classroom. As Nafisi's husband recognised, the trial effects a shift in power relationships: it makes the teacher accountable to her students, answerable for her choice of text and for her way of reading, while simultaneously creating a space in which other voices are heard, other readings are made available. The accomplishment in the classroom of such other readings is the focus of much of what follows (chapters 5 to 11).

Nafisi may seem like an easy target here, but the assumptions about reading and about literature that are revealed in *Reading Lolita* are both widespread and entrenched. My starting-point was the way in which these assumptions are embedded in policy, in the National Curriculum's description of what reading and progression in reading look like. Such assumptions are also to be found in more unexpected places. Chris Richards' *Young People, Popular Culture and Education* (2011) is a subtle, reflective account of work in and around cultural studies over the past four decades. Richards pays careful attention to the complexities of culture and pedagogy, providing sympathetic, properly theorised vignettes of situated textual practice. His discussion of Melvin Burgess's *Doing It* (2003), however, reveals an acceptance of one reading practice as the default:

Reading, and perhaps especially reading novels, has a history strongly anchored in individual privacy (Watt, 1957/1979). The reception of a novel has not been primarily a social act, conducted in the presence of others. Reading a novel is mostly something done alone or, if in the presence of others, at least silently.

...  
Transposed to a school classroom, the reading (aloud) of a novel is further entangled with the social relations of that site. Relations between students, but also between the student and the teacher, become the context of reception, a context absent when the novel is read alone and, most often, in silence.

(Richards 2011: 127, 128)

What is revealed in Richards' position is the dominance of the paradigm represented by the figure of Jane Eyre, with which this chapter began. Even in relation to the novel, the history of reading practices is far more diverse than Richards would seem to allow. And, as the ethnographic work explored above should indicate, I would want to contest his view of reading as an

activity that somehow lies outside the social. For Richards, one context for, and way of, reading (a novel), has assumed a normative status: this is the familiar image of the solitary, silent reader. Thus the collective (noisy) reading of the classroom is represented in Richards as abnormal, as, in effect, interference, the interposition of a context that gets in the way of the normal, direct relationship of text and individual reader.

Thus far, I have drawn on historical and ethnographic perspectives, as well as some versions of literary theory, in an attempt to problematise this paradigm. In the next chapter, I explore the methodological issues involved in observing and analysing reading in particular urban English classrooms.

## Chapter 4

### Towards a methodology

In this chapter, I discuss the methodological issues that confronted me in the course of my research. In what follows, I attempt to represent my methodological choices and decisions as a process, and a rather messy one at that. I explore at some length my role as researcher and my relationship with Monica and Neville, the two teachers whose classrooms provided the site of my research (sections 4.1 – 4.3, below). The negotiation of these roles and relationships was not something that was accomplished prior to the collection of data, but rather, a struggle with issues of research identities, ethics and orientations that continued through different drafts of this chapter.

I started with the idea that my research might be seen as a case study (Yin 2003); I am no longer sure that applying this somewhat capacious term to my work offers as much clarity as I had originally imagined. I have drawn on ethnographic perspectives (Street 1984, 1995, 2001; Szwed 1981; Brice Heath 1983/1996; Gregory 1996, 2004), but this research is not an ethnography. I have made use of multimodal approaches to data collection and analysis (Jewitt and Kress 2003; Kress and van Leeuwen 2001; Kress *et al.* 2001, 2005; Lomax 1998; van Leeuwen and Jewitt 2001), but I am not convinced that my research can be seen as sitting neatly within a multimodal methodological paradigm. Particularly in section 4.5 (below), I draw on Vygotsky (1987) and others working in a Vygotskian tradition (Bakhurst 1991; Tolman 1999) to construct an argument for my research as the socially

and historically situated reading (and re-reading) of the complexity and specificity of what goes on in urban English classrooms.

#### 4.1 The sample

In an earlier draft of this chapter, I described my methodology as a case study approach. Following Yin (2003), the case study is an appropriate research method when:

a 'how' or 'why' question is being asked about a contemporary set of events, over which the investigator has little or no control.

(Yin 2003: 9)

The scope of the case study, argues Yin, involves an empirical inquiry that

- investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when
- the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident.

(Yin 2003:13)

Yin's emphasis on the value of the case study approach in situations where phenomenon and context, in effect, merge into one another, seems particularly apt for my research, where my interest lies precisely in the interplay between a range of contexts (the cultural resources students bring with them, the models of reading that underpin the lessons, the affordances of the classrooms in which the lessons are enacted) and the phenomena of pedagogy and collaborative reading.

But any research project within the social sciences entails the collection of data from a sample of the population (Brown and Dowling, 1998: 29). The

sample size is determined by factors of availability and manageability – and describing my approach as a case study does not allow me to avoid addressing how my sample was selected.

My sample consists of two English classes in the same school, one Year 9 and one Year 10, and the two teachers who taught these classes during the academic year 2005-6. The selection of the sample depended, primarily, on the willingness of the two teachers to be involved in the research. The selection of these two classes was largely a function of the school timetable of lessons, since this was what determined which classes I could observe fairly regularly throughout the year. The size of the sample was determined by the amount of data I wanted to collect from the two classes (see below).

It would be possible to perceive the two teachers as representative, in their differences, of a broad spectrum of possibilities: one has thirty years' experience as a secondary school teacher, the other is in his first year of teaching; one is white and female, the other is male and from an ethnic minority. But this representativeness was not the criterion by which the teachers were chosen: what marked them out, and what made me want to ground my research in their practice, was my prior knowledge of them as teachers and hence my expectation that I would be able to observe in their classrooms particular pedagogies, particular forms of teaching and learning, particular ways of reading literary texts. My sample, then, was arrived at by a process of 'purposive sampling' (Denscombe 1998: 15-16) or 'theoretical sampling' (Brown and Dowling 1998: 30-31): these were envisaged as critical

cases, chosen to be representative of particular approaches to teaching and learning in the urban secondary English classroom.

I have known Monica for over twenty years. I met her in my first year as a secondary school teacher, when I was working at a school in Tower Hamlets. Monica, already an experienced teacher, was working at a different secondary school in the same borough; she was also, at the time, the secretary of the local branch of the National Union of Teachers, and it was in that capacity that I, becoming active in teacher trade unionism, first got to know her. In 1989, when I became editor of *Socialist Teacher*, the journal of the Socialist Teachers' Alliance, Monica was on the editorial board and a regular contributor to the magazine. Writing at that time about the imposition of the National Curriculum, she produced an analysis that emphasised the inevitably contested nature of the curriculum and the importance of paying attention to the agency of the learners (Brady 1989). In the late 1990s, Monica and I worked at the same school in the inner London borough of Hackney, where she was the Head of Humanities and I was the Head of English. We collaborated in drafting a language policy for the school, and on a project that sought to make connections between the English and Humanities curriculum. In the course of this project, we team-taught lessons in English and Humanities, we spent time planning lessons together and reflecting on the linguistic and cognitive development of the students whom we both taught. I thus knew a great deal about Monica, and particularly about her deep commitment to work in mixed ability classrooms in which all



students would be expected, encouraged and enabled to develop and express their ideas.

After moving to Wharfside School in 2001, Monica started to teach English. The English class which I planned to observe was one that Monica had taught since their arrival at the school at the start of Year 7. I met them first towards the end of Year 8 (the summer of 2005) and continued to observe them until late in Year 9 (the summer of 2006).

The second teacher, Neville, joined Wharfside School as a newly-qualified teacher in September 2005, shortly after he had completed his PGCE at the Institute of Education. At the Institute, he had been in my tutor group, and I had visited him on his first teaching practice at Wharfside School. Neville had been inspired by the Vygotskian perspective on issues of language and learning that he had first encountered in a lecture given by Tony Burgess, early in the PGCE course (Burgess 2004). Neville's enthusiastic commitment to what might be conceptualised as a Vygotskian tradition was evident in the subject studies assignment which he wrote at the end of the course; inextricably linked with this was his commitment to the agency of school students and to the teacher's obligation to remain respectfully attentive to the complex histories and subjectivities of the students. His decision to work at Wharfside School was motivated by a recognition that the approach to teaching that he valued was one shared by members of the English department at the school.

There was, thus, nothing innocent about the selection of my sample: it was chosen because I wanted to research particular forms of practice within the English curriculum and because I was confident that I would be able to do this by observing classes taught by Monica and Neville. Also implicit, I think, in the way that I have characterised the two teachers is that I hoped that Monica and Neville would be active participants in the research, engaging me in dialogue about what went on in the classroom and about my analysis of the data that I gathered.

### **Wharfside School<sup>1</sup>**

Wharfside is a coeducational 11-19 comprehensive secondary school in East London. The roll is around 1,200 students, with approximately 55 per cent boys and 45 per cent girls. Students come from a wide range of heritage backgrounds. Just under fifty per cent are from White backgrounds and a further third from Asian backgrounds, largely Bangladeshi. Black, Chinese and other backgrounds are also represented. Almost half the students are bilingual, by which I mean that they operate in a least two different languages as part of their everyday lives (Miller 1983). Over a fifth of the students are identified as having special educational needs (SEN), while over seven per cent have full statements of special educational need. Well over fifty per cent of students are entitled to free school meals (the most widely-used proxy indicator of poverty in the UK).

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<sup>1</sup> Some of these data are derived from the most recent Ofsted (inspection) report on the school. To preserve the anonymity of the school, I have not given the reference for this report.

At the time the research data were collected, the English Department taught mixed ability classes in English throughout key stages 3 and 4.

## 4.2 Negotiating roles

Those were my hopes and my reasons for selecting Monica and Neville as my 'sample'; but it is also necessary to trace something of their sense of what might be involved in this research, what their expectations might have been, both of my role and of their own, and how the relationships developed over time.

### 4.2.1 *Teacher participants*

#### **(a) Monica**

The possibility of my conducting research in Monica's classroom had arisen in a face-to-face conversation early in 2005. In an email on 14 March, I attempted to provide Monica with some sense of what I hoped would be the focus of my research:

...  
I would like to talk to you more about my research. I'm actually quite enthusiastic about it, and I can see a way of using the data that I hope will emerge from your class to make an almost coherent argument about teaching, as well as about reading Shakespeare. I'm attaching two pieces to this: one is something I've written for *Changing English* (this version is not quite the final version), but it begins to sketch out some of the territory, in a very anecdotal and fragmentary way, that I would wish to explore more systematically through your class; the other is a very rough piece that begins to address some issues of methodology, but descends into incoherence.

And I really would like to come in next term to begin to get to know the class and to work out more detailed methodological

questions with you. I do hope you've not gone off the idea completely - I confess that I am relying on you.

[JY to MB, 14 March 2005]

The article to which I refer (Yandell 2005) is one in which I had used an 'opportunity sample' (Brown and Dowling, 1998: 29) – collected during visits to schools as part of my work as a PGCE tutor – to begin to explore some of the ways in which secondary students were reading literary texts in London classrooms. Two aspects of the email seem noteworthy: first, that there is an attempt to construct Monica as an active, informed participant in the research – not just as a convenient source of data; second, the pressure that I was applying on her, particularly in the final sentence, to allow me to use her classroom as a site of my research.

Monica's response, on 19 March, refers forward to the unit of work around *Julius Caesar* that she was planning to start with her Year 8 group after the Easter holiday; it also refers back to the reading she had done when on sabbatical in Australia:

Thanks for sending me this stuff which has given me much to think about and sent me back to read some of the notes I took in Australia from a more informed perspective on the nature of research. Of course I am happy to do this. Perhaps not about the filming aspect of it but apart from that very excited I'd say.

One thing sort of worries me and that is that I am not an English teacher. This doesn't concern me any more in terms of the deal that the class get because they seem to be making progress the same as everyone else and what they lose in my expertise in English they gain in my expertise as a teacher so I'm comfortable with that. It is just where you refer in the first page about a 'tradition of English teaching'. Some days I think I am still a sort of humanities teacher. Does it matter?

... The class ... are really looking forward to doing the Shakespeare. M—[a colleague] did a lot of work last year on it but only used Brutus' speech in the original. I read the play yesterday and thought I could use quite a lot of it. I'd like to talk to you about it.

I wondered if you had access to an article I liked very much in Australia and would like to re-read. It is from the American Educational Research Journal. Volume 38 2001 and is called 'Is October Brown Chinese?' [Lee 2001]

[MB to JY, 19 March 2005]

When Monica talks about her sense of her own professional identity – 'I am still a sort of humanities teacher' – she makes explicit an anxiety about her position in relation to subject English that was to re-surface much later on in the research project. This anxiety, as she indicates, arises here out of her sense of what is entailed in my research. If I am to look at English teaching, and traditions of English teaching, is she suitable to be included in the sample? My response, on 31 March, was intended to allay Monica's fears about her status as an English teacher – but what the exchange does is also to force me to clarify (for my benefit as well as hers) what I mean by a tradition of English teaching. One could almost suggest, then, that Monica is prompting me to clarify my research questions.

Thanks for your email. Hope conference was OK.

As for whether it matters that you're not an English teacher: absolutely not at all! On a bad day, I think that the tradition of English teaching to which I refer hardly ever existed at all; but insofar as it did/does exist, I think you are representative of it much more than not.

What I think I mean is by this tradition is not so much the content or even the methodology of 'English studies' but rather a pedagogical tradition: by this I mean a set of ideas (about how students learn, about the relationship of language to learning, and even about the relationship between students' experiences and identities within and beyond the classroom) and a set of practices (what students and teachers do in the classroom, how language is involved and

addressed in these activities, how resources of all kinds are deployed). So I suppose that I think that the line of divide, as it were, is not between different subject areas so much as between pedagogies - and probably, implicated in this, between political positions.

Something else may be relevant here. I'm aware that I have never been a proper English teacher, in the sense that I'm not really interested in, say, poetry, or the literary value of particular texts, but rather in the processes of thought - and hence of development - that (can) happen in the classroom. So the texts that I have read with kids have been successful, in my terms, to the extent that they have been used to create opportunities for talking and thinking ...

[JY to MB, 31 March 2005]

What is happening within the exchange of emails is much more than sorting out the details of a school visit. As indicated above, Monica had been a professional and political colleague for twenty years or so before the research project began. The email functions heuristically as a means whereby, in explaining my research interests to someone else, I was also clarifying my ideas for myself. At the same time, in the very same words, there is a persuasive intent – an attempt to convince Monica that she is the right person to participate in the research project. This happens both directly, in the final three paragraphs where I focus on the tradition of pedagogy in which I am interested and insist on Monica's place within that tradition; it also happens in the second paragraph, which uses details of the process of locating a scholarly paper to draw Monica into membership of the research community, as it were. What is happening, then, in this exchange, is a definition not merely of the research project but of Monica's role within it: and hence our relationship is also being redefined within this new and different domain of 'doing research.' And yet this new and different domain is also, in some

sense, not new at all, but rather a reframing of existing – longstanding – shared interests and commitments, pedagogic and political.

Email became the vehicle whereby Monica could update me on the work she had been doing with the class:

I started on JC yesterday with 8P. We looked at some pictures of JC/death of JC and did a sort of inference grid. We had quite a good discussion. I then did a background sheet that M-- did last year

[MB to JY, 7 April 2005].

Had a crap lesson with 9P this morning. Realised that I didn't know what I wanted them to get out of the Looking for Richard film so it was all a bit unsatisfactory

[MB to JY, 18 November 2005].

Had another great lesson with 9P today - Perry out again! We read the first part of the play and I just questioned them - tell me a line where he is saying he is ugly etc. Chris was very good at that. That was fun. Then we talked a bit about the history and tried to sort out the family tree and which Edward was which. Then we looked at the next bit of the film where he chats up Anne and had a really good discussion afterwards

[MB to JY, 24 November 2005].

We watched a bit of film today and did the work on the characters, looking at the pictures and annotating them. Sufiyan said why did we have to do all this old stuff and it was boring.

Caroline said it wasn't -and Kirsty agreed. I said that Shakespeares stories could be set in any period of time and that the characters were universal.

I asked them to think of a soap opera character that was like RIII. Foyzur said 'Dirty Den' then changed his mind and said Johnnie Allen. I confess that I occasionally watch East Enders so I do recognise the character but they know a lot and gave lots of reasons why. Like he seems such a nice guy but is behind a lot of trouble. And he gets others to do his dirty work.

Kirsty said Richard doesn't have a conscience but she couldn't say what a conscience was so Caroline helped define it by saying, 'he knows what he should do but he doesn't do it'

[MB to JY, 9 December 2005].

We are very laid back at the moment, reading *Stone Cold*. We got to the murder of Ginger yesterday and I asked them if it felt different from the other murders. Nobody said anything. Then Jenny said 'no'. Kemi came up with a textbook answer about how we had got to know Ginger and therefore felt more involved. Foyzur said 'do we?' and that was the end of it! Perry went on a 10 week holiday and has been taken off roll  
[MB to JY, 1 July 2006].

In these emails, it is clear, I think, that my interest in the class – and therefore Monica's desire to keep me informed about what has been happening – has an effect. Monica uses the email to reflect on the lessons – thereby both informing me and reflecting on her own practice and on her students' contributions. But I must be careful not to exaggerate the effect; this is not something new for Monica: of all the colleagues I have worked with as a school teacher, Monica was always one of the most acute observers of students' learning, one of the most systematically and rigorously reflective about her practice.

In these accounts, too, there is little sense of particular research identities: I am constructed more as an interested colleague, familiar with the class and with the work that the students are doing, rather than as a researcher. In the early stages of the research project, though, there were occasions when the question of my role had been more directly addressed. After the second lesson that I observed (12 May 2005), Monica and I spent an hour discussing what had occurred. The conversation continued in an exchange of emails the same evening:



I was thinking about the things you said today and have several sort of unconnected thoughts.

Firstly I am not afraid of criticism from you. Nobody challenges me now and I sometimes feel the lack of combat.

Secondly, M-- is an experienced English teacher and sometimes I lose confidence in what I am doing and worry that I am not doing the best for the class. That if I was a different sort of teacher they might do better in their SATs exams and that I don't have a right to deny them that. That if I was a different sort of teacher Kirsty would be able to spell properly by now. So I get drawn into things, whilst at the same time, inevitably distort them. Does that make sense? At the same time I know that when I talk to the kids I am making them think so I also feel confident that they are doing OK with me. They ask the right sort of questions and if I am restricted by concerns about their skills, they might stop doing this. And if I do try to be that different kind of teacher now (as I sometimes do), someone like Foyzur will relentlessly draw me back with questions.

Thirdly, I wonder if it is OK for me to get something from you in the lessons. Whether you could have for example suggested, that I draw them together and focus them on the why and the who. Or whether this would in some way distort your evidence. Anyway, we can talk more perhaps next week.

[MB to JY, 12 May 2005]

Monica's sense of herself as a teacher, and as an English teacher, is subtle, layered, self-conscious, complex. Acutely aware of the fact that she is, in a sense, new to English, she nonetheless maintains a confidence in the pedagogical values and practices that have long informed her teaching: 'when I talk to the kids I know that I am making them think.' There is, too, a consciousness of herself as historically situated: her relationship with this group of students has been built up over time, and the kind of teacher she is is implicated in these relationships (see also chapter 5, which explores these relationships and their effects).

But my relationship with Monica is also historied. What she has to say about herself as an English teacher in this email is not neatly separable from her sense of me, her addressee, as an experienced English teacher and as a former colleague. In an earlier version of this chapter, I suggested that this relationship 'inevitably complicated' Monica's sense of me as a researcher. It is an interesting phrase, revealing, perhaps, my desire (at the time) for a more straightforward research identity.

In my reply, I tried to dispel the notion that my role as researcher meant that I must remain a detached observer of Monica's lessons – as if the classroom were a crime scene and I the forensic scientist, clad in protective overalls and ready to bag up whatever evidence came to light.

First, thank you for writing this: it is really important, I think, that we preserve/create/maintain this kind of openness. And thank you, too, for making it OK for me to be critical.

I want to come back to the second thing (about M--, and your role as an English teacher). But the third thing - about my role - I think I can answer easily. There is no problem with me intervening (if you don't think there's a problem). The more I think about (and find out about) research, the less I believe in notions of a researcher's detachment, or whatever. (And in any case, I was intervening by being there, by talking to the kids and listening to them - and, inevitably, my presence in a lesson is going to make you, or M--, or anyone else, behave in slightly different ways from if I wasn't there. I was conscious of the extent to which this was true for me at Kingsland, when you and I were both involved in your tutor group's English lessons: there, I think, it was pretty straightforward - your presence made me a better teacher, in lots of ways, some easily identifiable, others not. And yes, of course, that was a different context - but you get the point.)

There was, though, a powerful reason why I couldn't have intervened in the way you suggest in the lesson today - and that's because it wasn't till I had talked it through with you that

I had even begun to work out why the shift in focus mattered, and thus was able to start to think about ways in which it might be achieved. So in the lesson I wasn't sitting there thinking, oh, what Monica should do now is ... (This sounds like a caricature to me - because I can't imagine the situation arising like that. But if it did, in that I had a thought in mid-lesson, about how things could go, I would definitely suggest it to you.)

But your second point opens up a more complicated area, I think. Not because you might be selling the kids short because you're not a proper English teacher - I do just think that that's laughable. No, what I was beginning, very clumsily, to think about after the lesson was what the lesson revealed about the complexity of using someone else's SoW [Scheme of Work]. This is something that crops up in one way a lot with BTs [Beginning Teachers, then the term used for PGCE students] - how do they learn that even in a dept with lots of detailed schemes of work and lesson plans and so on, they still have to think about their own lessons, with specific groups of students, and how they are going to make those lessons their own, so to speak? But that's not the only thing, I think, that was at issue today. I think I was being a bit lazy when I started to pose it as M---English/Monica-History, because that makes it look as if it is (simply) a difference in subject specialisms that explains the tension between what you were doing with the assassination idea. It's got far more to do with what you say about making them think (Vygotskian problem-solving, as I put it a fortnight ago). But what's slightly overwhelming (or maybe just very powerful) about this difference (between you and M--) is that something that might appear to be (just) a kind of theoretical difference actually really does inform a different set of practices, to the extent that you intervene in the lesson to pull the activity in different directions - and thus the activity becomes a different activity: it's no longer an information retrieval exercise, linked thematically to the play but actually adding precious little to students' understanding of it; instead, it opens up the possibility that students will, in thinking about assassinations as political acts, involving not just isolated individuals but much wider movements and forces, perhaps begin to think about what is going on in the play, and about how Shakespeare represents these political acts, these social processes. One version is, as it were, Assassinations through the Ages - hitting a range of NC English buttons, good fun, and maybe boosting everyone's store of general knowledge; the other version is using all of this to circle round and worry away at and return again to the central problem posed by the play: what is going on here, how is it represented, and how can we begin to make sense of it ...? What are these

characters doing when they kill Caesar, and what do we think of it?

Of course, it's not as simple as that: what I've just written makes it sound like there is a binary opposition between the two approaches - when what we were beginning to talk about after the lesson was the extent to which the lesson bore traces of both approaches. (And then there's also the fact of students' agency - that students could use M--'s lesson to arrive at different interpretations and understandings of the play, or could remain fixated by the question of Trotsky's birthplace, however much you wanted them to use what they knew about Trotsky's assassination to think more about the politics of JC ...)

In the preceding paragraph, I have used 'M--' as a kind of shorthand - a way of referring to other approaches - though also as a specific reference to M--. And there is probably a bit of an ethical issue here. I need to find a way of exploring these differences that doesn't sound dismissive of or derogatory to M-- - while yet making clear my own perspective ..

But that's maybe for another day.

Just one other bit of a thought before I stop: the way I put the idea of intervening in the PowerPoint work - stopping them and saying to make another slide that deals with who was responsible for the assassination, or whatever, made it sound as if such an approach was necessarily a better way of doing it than by opening this up in the presentations and in your interventions with pairs and individual students - when this isn't necessarily so at all. One of the reasons for observing closely/using a video camera (at some stage in the research) is to capture precisely such interventions as a means of acknowledging their importance - to see such interventions as a central part of pedagogy and of the dialogic classroom that you and 8P create together.

[JY to MB, 12 May 2005]

Some of the issues raised in Monica's email and taken up by me in my response to her – about planning, pedagogy and professional identity as they are instantiated in teaching a scheme of work around *Julius Caesar* are explored again in later chapters (chapters 5 and 10 in particular). Here, though, I want to emphasise something which now, nearly six years on,

seems much clearer to me than it did at the time: that there is no neat division in these exchanges between teacher and researcher identities. That research and pedagogic interests coalesced in this way no longer seems to me to require an apology: it was, rather, a defining characteristic of this research.

**(b) Neville**

Inevitably, my research in Neville's classroom entailed different negotiations and revealed different tensions and anxieties. The relationship had a different starting point: my suggestion to Neville that he might be prepared to allow me to conduct research in his classroom appeared in some ways to promise continuity with our previous relationship, where, as his tutor, I had visited Neville on teaching practice. Thus, when he emails me shortly after the start of his first term as a newly-qualified teacher, the doubts Neville expresses about the suitability of his lessons for my data collection serve as a preamble to a description of the difficulties of beginning teaching that constructs me in a tutor/mentor role:

At the moment, it's hard to believe my lessons could be useful for any kind of data - or for anything else for that matter. I think now that I spent the summer ineffectually underestimating the degree of resistance to (my idea of) learning among the students at Wharfside. Currently, about one-third of each of my two Year 8s see English as an opportunity for Blu-Tak-throwing with their softest teacher; my two Year 7s are already beginning to come to a similar realisation (only half in one class did their first homework); my Year 11s have decided to ignore every word I say, turn up late and bookless and chat through each entire lesson (I am really worried about them, and about failing them ...); and my Year 10s are bored out of their minds, insisting that what I'm asking them to do makes no sense and is too difficult, even though they seem to me too blinkered and stolid to give it a try.

(On reflection, some of the above may be a bit of an exaggeration. But only in that it is happening much of the time, rather than all of it.)

I, meanwhile, am bewildered by the ratio of number-of-students to amount-of-time. I feel convinced that my only means of addressing behaviour involves some airy notion of following things up, not least since I sense my Year 8s waiting to see whether or not I will. This, I now realise, can take up more time than planning and marking put together. The necessary levels of organisation and ever-mindfulness seem a long way away right now. As does my enjoyment of big old ideas back in Assignment-heavy June.

How are things going with you? You got the new cohort in yet? Still managing to think of yourself as a teacher of not-teachers?

[NG to JY, 13 September 2005]

And then, the following weekend, Neville's head of department committed suicide. Neville emailed his former tutor group at the Institute the words that he had read out at the whole-school assembly:

I loved Mark as a manager, a mentor, a colleague, and a friend. Having the classroom next to his, learning from him, laughing with him, drinking with him: the thought of these things brought me to Wharfside; their reality was part of my daily life. I miss his physical presence; his voice, his manner, his shirts, his smile. I miss his clear-sightedness, his calmness, his generosity.

Mark had such integrity. It was manifest in everything I saw of him. I never heard him utter a word cheaply. I have never known him to let anyone down. His convictions were hard won and deeply thought through. However difficult the circumstances, whatever the cost to himself, Mark had the courage to speak and act truly.

There are some amazing people in education – people who take intelligence, hard work, sensitivity and kindness, and turn them into a career. Mark not only embodied these qualities, he made a principle of making them count. He nurtured them in those around him, by making people feel valued, looked after, and understood. Every day, he used those qualities to change people's lives.

I will miss him.

[NG to JY, 21 September 2005]

However tragic Mark's death was, it may seem that it and Neville's reaction to it have no place in this account of my research methodology. Yet, looking back on it now, years later, it seems perfectly clear to me that the absence left by Mark's death significantly shaped my relationship with Neville throughout the year.

In mid-October, I emailed Neville a draft of the letter that I intended to give to each of the students in his class. What follows is part of his response:

I like the letter about your research. Though it's hard to reconcile what goes on in my classroom with the phrase 'good practice', I like the idea that there's a lack of description and theorisation of whatever it is I am trying to do. On Monday, I set 10.6 the task of debating which character is to blame for the tragic events of *Romeo and Juliet*. (This reminded me of my argument with L- D- the day you were at K-: this outcome was never part of any scheme of work, and occurred to me only because of the students' [lack of] response so far.) In the event, about ten students blamed more than half a dozen different characters; they showed an understanding of the play's events which they'd spent weeks insisting they didn't have; and (I thought) some of the readings were entirely their own. A couple of girls were very cross with Capulet for not supporting his daughter ('She hasn't been shown any love in her life, it's not surprising she wants to be with Romeo'); another blamed Friar Lawrence and his harebrained schemes; and one boy blamed the Nurse, who, apparently, should just have told Capulet about the tryst, so that he could give Juliet a slap, and all the silliness would have been over and done with

[NG to JY, 21 October 2005].

There is in his account of the *Romeo and Juliet* lesson an acknowledgement of our shared history – of my visit to the school where he had been placed for his second teaching practice, and in this reference, too, an allusion to shared

values, shared understandings about teaching and learning and a shared scepticism about objective-led teaching. Alongside Neville's self-deprecating presentation of his part in the lesson, there is a real interest in what the students bring to the lesson, a pleasure in their engagement in talk about the text, in their readiness to offer opinions. There are, here, indications of the attentiveness to student voices that is common to Neville and Monica's practice.

I suspect, too, that my presence as a researcher in Neville's classroom may have seemed relatively unproblematic to him because of the extent to which it was not readily distinguishable from the observer role of the PGCE tutor, lurking in the classroom, making notes, occasionally contributing something to the lesson. He welcomed the kind of observation that I offered, differing from that provided by senior staff within the school in that my focus was on learning rather than, say, on issues of classroom management. And I remained someone with whom he could discuss lesson plans, coursework requirements and problematic students - and all the other difficulties that confront any newly-qualified teacher in a challenging urban school.

Did this mean that my role as researcher was insufficiently clearly defined? The answer to this question depends on the extent to which one subscribes to the view that the researcher, and the research itself, should remain detached from the object of analysis. As time has passed, I have become readier to discount this view and to accept that my research was



simultaneously a pedagogic intervention. At the time, though, the question troubled me.

#### *4.2.2 My role: from teacher to researcher?*

Two moments, one from each of the classes. Firstly, an early visit to Monica's class, in the summer of 2005, when they were still in Year 8. The class was reading *Julius Caesar*, and had been working on the funeral orations. Students had been asked to present speeches. Monica was videoing each performance. I had brought a digital (still) camera: I thought that some images of the students would be an interesting, useful extension of the data that I was just beginning to collect. So I took photographs of the students as they delivered their speeches.

What I had not anticipated was how disruptive my intervention in the lesson would be. It was not, I am sure, the taking of photographs: this act was a frequent occurrence in Monica's lessons. It was because I was taking the pictures – and I was an outsider, an unknown. It felt uncomfortable to me at the time, but I persevered. Reflecting on the lesson afterwards, with the teaching assistant who had been present, and who also knew the class well, Monica confirmed my fears:

Hi John,  
Today was another odd lesson - as you said, interesting things ...  
A few observations. Apart from being the first day back and usual problems with HW not done and all of us being not quite together. Z-- (the TA) commented that the pupils felt pressured by photographs and videos. I hadn't thought of

this and thought afterwards maybe the video wasn't necessary and I could have made notes and concentrated more on what they were saying rather than the video. And perhaps they wondered why you were taking photos? I think I/we need to talk to them a bit more about why you are there. Z-- thought they might feel like they are being inspected, and if this is happening over many lessons it is too hard to keep up their best behaviour!

Also, I think we need to talk a bit about what happens if the best laid plans go wrong. Last term for example, without you there I might have talked about the Liverpool match because that is what they wanted to talk about. And today, I might have changed the lesson when so few had their HW done, or gone with the make poverty history idea for a bit. But I sort of felt that I had to persevere with the plan. I suppose I'm saying that not all lessons will have the outcomes we expect and perhaps that is fine with you but I need to know that. I don't think any of these are major problems - it is just that today I had to rush and so did you and maybe we have to build in some time - even by email, for discussion.

Anyway, I am reading Richard III now and think it will be interesting ...

[MB to JY, 6 June 2005]

Hi Monica

I'm sure that Z-- is absolutely right, and actually it felt intrusive, or at least inadequately explained, to me, when I was taking pix. I don't know whether this caused stuff, but it certainly was making some of them feel uneasy. I should have stopped, I think. In any case, I do need to explain to them what I'm doing there. I'd be happy to come in and talk to 8P sometime soon, if we could arrange this, though it might all seem a bit pointlessly retrospective; it might be better to leave it until next term, before we launch into Richard III: one of the things that I have to do is to write something for the kids about my research - a page of A4 or less, formally informing them; what I'd like to do is to talk to them about it, and why I'm hanging around in their lessons, at the same time. Again, I think all of this might best be accomplished next term - but if you think otherwise, you should say. If I were to do it this term, it might be possible to combine with getting some feedback from 8P on JC.

The second point - and again I am really glad that you raise it. It's obviously no use saying things like 'pretend I'm not there', because I am there, and that's bound to affect things. But as much as you possibly can you should go with your instincts, change things when it seems right, and so on. As

far as the point of me being there is to collect evidence, that is:

(a) subordinate to the lesson - ie it would be wholly unethical for the research to interfere with what you feel you should be doing/want to be doing

(b) my problem, not yours

Whatever happens in the lesson is useful to me - it's all real material, And in any case, what I am interested in is a sociocultural model of reading, teaching and learning - so it would be a bit strange if life didn't intervene. (so, to take the last lesson I was in before half term, it would have been fascinating to listen to the post-match talk.

So as far as is humanly possible, you shouldn't feel in any way constrained by me.

[JY to MB, 6 June 2005]

The second moment. Darren, a student in Neville's Year 10 group, was intent on distracting Jess, the girl next to whom I was sitting. He threw a crumpled up ball of paper, which hit me on the head. I asked to talk to him outside the class. In the corridor, I said that I thought that I had treated him with respect, so was surprised at what he had just done. He said that he had not been aiming at me (!) and apologised.

We both returned to the classroom. It was all amicable enough, and yet I felt uncomfortable. I had reacted as I would have done had I been the teacher in the room – I reacted as if I were a teacher – and I felt that this was inappropriate. Perhaps it was – but now I am not sure that any other response would have been more appropriate.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) emphasise the central importance of relational factors in the negotiation and conduct of research. In my work with Monica and Neville and their classes, the issue for me was not how to construct

working relationships but how to manage a research relationship that intersected with and overlaid other, longer-standing roles and relationships.

With Monica, I agreed that it would be helpful if I were to teach a couple of lessons so that her class could get to know me – in effect, so that I could establish a relationship with them. And so, in October 2005, I introduced the class to *Richard III*, using the *Developing Tray* software about which I have written elsewhere (Yandell 1997a; Yandell and Franks 2009; see also Moore 1999: 131-143). In the next English lesson, I introduced my research to the class. Thereafter, I found it much easier to inhabit a role within 9P's classroom – a role that involved observation but also some (limited) involvement in partnership teaching. The students thus were able to see me as someone whose primary purpose might have been something different (research) but whose presence in their classroom could be accommodated within a spectrum of teacherly roles. What this also achieved, I think, was a way that I could be in Monica's lessons that was least disruptive, least unnerving, least undermining of her teaching. In Neville's lessons, too, and for more or less the same reasons, I became a peripheral participant, an occasional contributor to class.<sup>2</sup>

Clandinin and Connelly's emphasis on relational factors is instructive here. Not only is it fatuous to pretend to a kind of invisibility as an observer in a classroom – because any observation is inevitably an intervention; it is also not necessarily the case that the least disruptive intervention is the most self-

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<sup>2</sup> For some instances when I intervened in lessons, see chapters 7 and 9 (below).

effacing. For many teachers, indeed, the most unnerving presence is that of the silent, detached Ofsted inspector.

Earlier, in my mention of the forensic scientist, I gestured at a particular model of detached research, a particular orientation towards data collection. In this account of the two teachers who participated with my in this research, I have located the research inquiry in a nexus of specific histories and relationships. In constructing this text, I am conscious of a way of reading it that would dismiss any findings produced by such methods as hopelessly contaminated. How, after all, could one hope to claim any kind of objectivity when the whole business of data collection is, by the researcher's own admission, so thoroughly enmeshed in particularity?

Or could this particularity be a strength of the research? And is the attention to roles and relationships an inevitable constituent of any account of qualitative research? My approach is premised on the understanding that the researcher is inevitably part of the social world being studied (Hammersley and Atkinson 1991). A fully naturalistic enquiry, however, is an impossibility (Brown and Dowling, 1998: 57): my presence, even without the presence of a digital video camera, changed the empirical setting(s) – the classrooms in which the data were gathered. Neither wholly emic nor wholly etic, neither a full participant nor a wholly-detached observer, my position within the empirical setting remained necessarily problematic. But what research position is not?

What I would want to argue is that my history – as a teacher, and as a teacher with already-existing relationships with Monica and Neville – shaped this research in centrally important ways: it enabled me to participate in the lessons; it enabled me to enter into particular forms of dialogue with Monica, with Neville and with their students; it enabled me to observe the lessons from a particular perspective and thus to make the meanings that I have made – the meanings that are explored in the following chapters. Thus, also, there are places in the second part of this thesis, where I examine my empirical data (chapters 5-11), when I return to my experiences as a teacher. My history as a teacher, my engagement with questions of pedagogy and policy as a teacher, frames and informs these empirical data. (This framing is most prominent in chapter 6.)

Another manifestation of my difficulties with my role as a researcher and my relationship with the participants in the research arose over the question of names. For the first three years of my research project, I remained committed to the idea that I would use the real names of the teachers with whom I was working. To do otherwise seemed to me to be a betrayal of our relationship, an assertion of power at the expense of accountability. When I first read the following paragraph from Sanchez-Jankowski (2002), I pencilled a question mark next to it – an indication of my failure to accept that his argument might be applicable to my work:

Whatever the specifics of the agreement, it is important that participant-observation research protect the subjects' anonymity and confidentiality. Even in those cases where the subjects say they don't care about either, or they request that their names be made public in the report, both anonymity

and confidentiality must not be compromised. If they are compromised, then there exists the potential for increased feelings of internal conflict about what the 'proper' position of responsibility should be. Such conflict can lead only to confusing issues regarding loyalty to informants for aiding them in their research with loyalty to the data themselves. This has often been called the problem of invoking one's values into the research process, but it is more than that. It goes beyond values; it is about understanding what is being seen for itself, of itself, and by itself.

(Sanchez-Jankowski 2002: 153)

It took a great deal of time (and thought) for me to reach the conclusion that Sanchez-Jankowski's distinction between responsibility to the data and responsibility to 'informants' was a valid one.

Now, some years later, it is an issue that continues to bother me. I have been involved in a collaborative international project exploring the teaching of literature (van de Ven and Doecke 2011). The participants in this project have included both colleagues in higher education and those working in schools. The approach adopted by van de Ven and Doecke, such that school-based colleagues enter into the research project on an equal basis, where their voices are heard alongside those of the researchers, seems to me to be much closer to the relationship that I have had with the two teachers who figure so prominently in what follows. This was also the model that was adopted in a paper that my colleague, Anne Turvey, and I wrote in collaboration with two school-teachers, one of whom (Monica) also figures prominently in the current research (Turvey *et al.* 2006).

I take Sanchez-Jankowski's point that, in some sense, my commitment as a researcher must be to the data that I present. I certainly take responsibility

for the interpretation of those data that forms the bulk of this thesis. But I cannot, quite, accept that Monica and Neville were my informants. They weren't: they were participants in this research, and for their participation I remain very grateful. In this respect, therefore, I would want to place my research within the paradigm that 'positions teachers as collaborators rather than as objects of inquiry' (Doecke *et al.* 2007: 12, see also Lunenberg *et al.* 2007).

#### 4.3 Ethical issues

Before the data collection began, consent was gained from the two teachers who were participants in the research, and from their headteacher.

It was the view of the teachers and of their headteacher that, because the data were to be gathered in ('normal') timetabled lessons, and hence that no disruption to students' education was anticipated, the general parental permission, given by all parents and carers at the moment of a student's admission to the school, was sufficient.

In each of the two classes, I was given the chance to address the students, to explain the purposes of my research and to invite students to ask questions or to seek further clarification. Each student was given a copy of a letter, outlining my intentions (see appendices 1 and 2).



In one of the two classes, I also had the opportunity to feed back some of my preliminary analysis of the data.

In addition, it seems to me that the whole of the previous section, dealing with the negotiation of roles in the empirical setting, addresses matters that are inseparable from ethical issues. The fundamental principle of research, that no harm should be caused to participants by their involvement in the research, informed this negotiation, to the extent that decisions about my positioning, physically and figuratively, in the class were informed by a desire not to disrupt the education of the students. As I have indicated (above), though, being minimally disruptive did not mean being minimally visible or maximally passive.

To preserve confidentiality, students' names have been replaced with culturally appropriate pseudonyms, and the name of the school that was the site of this research has also been changed.

#### 4.4 Data collection

Thirty-seven one-hour lessons were observed, sixteen of which involved Neville and his Year 10 English group, twenty involved Monica and her Year 9 English group (including two in the summer term preceding their arrival in Year 9) and one involved the same Year 9 group in a History lesson.

Of the Year 10 lessons, ten were videotaped; sixteen of the Year 9 English lessons were videotaped, as well as the Year 9 History lesson.

<b>Date</b>	<b>Class observed</b> (v=videotaped)	<b>Class observed</b> (v=videotaped)
28.4.05	8P	
12.5.05	8P	
18.10.05	9P	
8.11.05	9P	
15.11.05	9P (v)	10.6
21.11.05	9P (v)	10.6
22.11.05	9P (v)	
29.11.05	9P (v)	10.6
1.12.05	9P (v)	10.6
5.12.05		10.6
8.12.05	9P (v)	10.6
6.1.06	9P (v)	10.6 (v)
10.1.06	9P (v)	10.6 (v)
13.1.06	9P (v)	
19.1.06	9P (v) + History (v)	10.6 (v)
24.1.06	9P (v)	10.6 (v)
7.2.06	9P ( <i>interviews</i> )	10.6 (v)
10.3.06		10.6 (v)
14.3.06		10.6 (v)
24.3.06		10.6 (v)
20.4.06	9P (v)	
21.4.06	9P (v)	10.6 (v)
25.4.06	9P (v)	
27.4.06	9P (v)	10.6 (v)

#### *4.4.1 Room questions*

Wharfside School was designated as a Training School, equipped with a special observation room – a classroom kitted out with a two-way mirror, and video cameras mounted on the ceiling. The room is designed to facilitate the observation and digital video recording of teaching.

When I was planning the programme of classroom observations to be carried out during 2005-6, I had originally envisaged that we would use the observation room. I knew that I wanted to collect digital video data, and the existence (and availability) of this room seemed to simplify my task.

When I thought more about the question of location, I became less sure that the benefits of the observation room outweighed its disadvantages. Filming might have been made easier, but at the cost of a disruption to the normal routines of the classes I wished to observe. To use the observation room felt wrong – because it would have been imposing an element of artificiality on the data: abstracting the teachers and their classes from their regular, timetabled classrooms would have produced different – less representative – lessons. The habitus of the teacher, the reactions of the students, the wall displays, would all have been transformed – for no good reason. Of course, my presence, and the presence of the video camera, would in any case alter the lessons. But I wanted to minimise this element of disruption – not to create a kind of laboratory lesson.

Neville's Year 10 class was, therefore, observed in Neville's regular teaching room throughout.

The story of Monica's Year 9 class is somewhat more complex. Monica, as a teacher who worked part-time in the English department, had not been assigned her 'own' classroom, and her Year 9 class was timetabled in at least three different classrooms. In addition to the fact that students often arrived late because they had forgotten which of the rooms the English lesson was in, this situation created problems of continuity. Monica makes extensive use of displays of students' collaborative work: ideas shared in groups and presented on large pieces of sugar paper are mounted on the walls and referred to in subsequent lessons. Because this way of working was not possible when successive lessons were held in a series of different classrooms, Monica made the decision to use the observation room as the only consistently free (unoccupied) classroom:

I am thinking that maybe I will have all my lessons in the training room and put stuff on the walls there. It is so complicated getting all the various bits of equipment to work elsewhere and at least there it is usually OK.

[MB to JY, 9 December 2005]

And so, for part of the time that I observed and filmed the Year 9 group, I did so in the observation room – but not because of the recording equipment available therein.

Monica's students, moreover, made it clear that they did not like the observation room. They felt uncomfortable in it – unsettled by the two-way

mirror, which some of them associated with the presence, behind the mirror, of a member of the school's senior management – an authority figure.

#### *4.4.2 Decisions and choices about filming*

As I indicated above, I had decided, before beginning to gather data, that I wanted to use the resources of digital video. I wanted to be able to explore the possibility of multimodal analyses of the interactions that took place in the classroom. I wished to analyse 'the systematic practices used by participants in interaction to achieve courses of collaborative action with each other'

(Goodwin 2001: 160). Such analysis, Goodwin asserts:

... requires data of a particular type, specifically a record that maintains as much information as possible about the setting, embodied displays and spatial organization of all relevant participants, their talk, and how events change through time. In practice, no record is completely adequate. Every camera position excludes other views of what is happening. The choice of where to place the camera is but the first in a long series of crucial analytical decisions.

(Goodwin 2001: 160)

But I had not worked out – or even considered – the issues about where to place the camera: indeed, I didn't realise that this was an issue.

As Lomax and Casey (1998) argue:

... the researcher, by doing 'being a researcher', reflexively contributes to the videoed definition of the encounter. This is not least because she must make choices within the context of interaction about when and how to film the event and when it is more felicitous not to film. These actions are influenced, in part, by what is 'appropriate' behaviour in the field.

(Lomax and Casey 1998: 4.3)

What follows is an account of those choices.

With both classes, I felt that I had to get to know the class – and to become known to the students – before I could introduce a video camera into the lesson. This was something that had emerged from my experience with a (still) camera (see above). I felt that the camera would be less intrusive if I were already a known and trusted presence. I also felt that I needed to explain to the students what I was doing (and why) before beginning to film them.

The first couple of lessons that I filmed with Monica's class were lessons that I taught. I used two cameras, positioned so as to capture as much of the lesson – by which I mean the students' participation – as possible. After these two lessons, I abandoned the second camera. Though there were gains in using two – there were things that I had been able to observe with the second camera that would have remained unobserved had I not used it – it seemed to me that that these gains were too small to compensate for the extra difficulties and time required to set up and review two sets of footage of each lesson that I filmed. It was, in short, not manageable within my resources. So I reverted to a single camera.

What I also found was that a camera mounted on a tripod in the corner of a classroom becomes unobtrusive, forgotten about, very quickly. This was, therefore, the way that I filmed most of the lessons; the only exception to this was when, in Monica's class, students were performing role plays or making presentations to the rest of the class. In these moments, the performance

element in the task seemed to justify – encourage – a different approach: where I could, I filmed these sections of lessons holding the camera, tracking the students who were performing.

What is clear from my experience is that there is not one single effect of this method of data collection, but several. To talk as I have done in the previous paragraph of minimising the disruption caused by the presence of the camera is not to pretend that there was no effect. But the experience of the early lesson with Monica's class, when I took still photos, demonstrated to me the need to address these issues explicitly – and to minimise any such disruption as far as was possible.

My strong impression was that there were different effects, at different times and in relation to different participants. There was some self-consciousness on the part of Monica – a self-consciousness that I was aware of because of her declared (though low-key) reluctance to be filmed.

For the students, part of the variability lay in their proximity to the camera – but it also varied according to the activity. To some extent, this is what Heider (1976: 53-54) talks about in terms of 'relative energy level' – more consciousness of the camera when there is, as it were, less going on. But it also varied according to the activity: for example, in the presentation of role plays, 9P seemed to accept a much more intrusive camera role – handheld, with me moving to get a clearer/closer shot. The point about this is that there is not a single variable but several, including: the position of the camera; the

nature of the activity; the students' relationship to the lesson and their relationship with the researcher: this last is the point made by Heider (1976:99) about the participants' familiarity with the filmmaker.

What is at issue, in practice, was not the validity of Lomax and Casey's insistence (1998: 4.3) that all participants necessarily display an orientation towards the research process, but rather the extent to which this awareness was a source of distraction – the extent to which the awareness ran counter to the explicit purposes of the lessons in which they were (meant to be) engaged.

In Neville's class, there were more explicit references to the presence of the video camera, a more obvious awareness of it. This was manifested in a variety of ways: most common were questions, mid-lesson, about whether the camera was on.

Some of Monica's lessons in the observation room – lessons where I was not present – were filmed using the video cameras attached to the ceiling. I watched this footage. One of the most striking things about it is how great a difference the camera angle makes. With the camera mounted on a tripod, the digital video footage is, more or less, shot from a point of view level with students' heads as they are sitting at the tables. What is presented is thus a view of the classroom fairly closely equivalent to that of a human observer's perspective.



IMAGES REDACTED DUE TO THIRD PARTY RIGHTS OR OTHER LEGAL ISSUES

A large rectangular area that has been redacted, appearing as a solid black box. It is intended to show the perspective from a video camera in a Year 9 classroom on December 1, 2005.

**Figure 4.1:** the perspective offered by my video camera  
(Year 9, 1 December 2005)

With the observation room cameras, on the other hand, what is produced is a bird's eye view, in which teacher and students alike are reduced, diminished. It also seems that the cameras are set up, or are directed, in such a way as to focus primarily on the teacher's performance: relatively little attention, in the footage I have observed, is paid to the students' part in the lesson, other than when they are responding directly to the teacher.

IMAGES REDACTED DUE TO THIRD PARTY RIGHTS OR OTHER LEGAL ISSUES

A large rectangular area that has been redacted, appearing as a solid black box. It is intended to show the perspective from an observation room camera in a Year 9 classroom on December 15, 2005.

**Figure 4.2:** the perspective offered by the observation room camera  
(Year 9, 15 December 2005)

I therefore continued to use my own camera, even when filming in the observation room. It seems to me that this decision was primarily not a technical one: what it reflects, in part at least, is the commitment, outlined above, to conceptualising those involved in the research as participants, not as objects of investigation. And it was important to me that my research did not seem to the participants to be associated with institutional regimes of observation and monitoring (Yandell 2000; 2010).

When filming in Neville's classroom, there was also an issue about the placing of the camera. In the first couple of lessons that I filmed, the camera was placed at the side of the room, near the front. I had put it there because it was the point from which I could include the greatest number of students. It was Darren, a student in the class, who suggested to me that it would be better to place the camera at the back of the room, from where it would be possible to film more of the teacher. I explained that I was most interested in filming what he and the other students were doing - but I adopted Darren's suggestion: I made this decision because I was interested in filming Neville's performance, but also because I wanted to show some respect for Darren's contribution as a participant in the research. So the decision was, in some sense, and like so much else in real-world research, something of a compromise (Robson 2002).

#### *4.4.3 Towards data analysis*

While observing lessons, I made notes. After each lesson that I had observed, I made more extensive notes, largely to remind myself of what had seemed interesting or significant in the lesson. For each of the lessons that I videotaped, this more extensive note-taking was accomplished while reviewing the video footage.

Whenever possible, I talked with the teacher after the lesson – but this could only happen when the teacher had no other pressing commitments; on some occasions, these conversations were audio-recorded. More frequently, the teachers shared thoughts on the lessons with me via email (see above, sections 4.2.1 and 4.2.2, for examples of such correspondence).

Other data, in the form of students' PowerPoint presentations (from the Year 9 class) and written work, were collected in July 2006. (I draw on these data mainly in chapters 10 and 11, below.) Also in July 2006, I showed some of the footage from the Year 9 lessons to a focus group of students from the Year 9 class. I audiotaped their discussion of the footage: some of this discussion is included in chapter 8 (below).

#### 4.5 Data analysis and interpretation

As I indicated at the start of this chapter, what I am presenting is not an ethnography, but it does draw on ethnographic perspectives. Geertz (1973) identified three characteristics of ethnographic description:

it is interpretive; what it is interpretive of is the flow of social discourse; and the interpreting involved consists in trying to rescue the 'said' of such discourse from its perishing occasions and fix it in perusable terms.

(Geertz 1973: 20)

In what follows, I say something about the interpretive method and tradition in which I would want to locate my work, before moving on to consider how I have identified, selected and represented the 'said', in Geertz's terms, which I wish to rescue and render perusable.

##### 4.5.1 *Vygotsky and elaborated description*

In his analysis of Piaget's theory of egocentric speech, Vygotsky makes the point that 'he who considers facts, inevitably considers them in the light of one theory or another' (Vygotsky 1987: 55). His critique of Piaget is, in effect, that Piaget viewed his empirical data through the lens of a bourgeois idealist consciousness, a consciousness that took as axiomatic the primacy of the (asocial) self. For Piaget, then, the central and defining trajectory of development was from the individual to the social: speech begins as egocentric, only later, under the pressures of the environment becoming socially orientated. For Vygotsky, on the other hand, the primary movement is from the social to the individual (though the relationship between these poles remains a more complex, dialectical one). But Vygotsky does not

content himself with a challenge to Piaget's philosophical/ideological premises. Arguing for a move away from 'prescientific concepts' and 'semi-metaphysical systems and theories' (1987:54), he seeks to ground his challenge to Piaget in his own experimental data. What is interesting, in the context of questions about methodology, is the way in which Vygotsky reports on such data. To explore this point, I need to quote at some length:

Consider, for example, the following episode. In one of our experiments, a child of five-and-a-half was drawing a picture of a tram. While drawing a line that would represent a wheel, the child put too much pressure on the pencil and the lead broke. The child attempted, nonetheless, to complete the circle by pressing the pencil to the paper. But nothing appeared on the paper other than the imprint of the broken pencil. As if to himself, the child quietly said, 'Broken.' Laying the pencil aside, he took a paintbrush and began to draw a broken tram car that was in the process of being repaired after an accident, continuing to talk to himself from time to time about the new subject of his drawing. This egocentric utterance is clearly related to the whole course of the child's activity. It constitutes a turning point in his drawing and clearly indicates his conscious reflection on the situation and its attendant difficulties. It is so clearly fused with the normal process of thinking that it is impossible to view it as a simple accompaniment of that thinking.

(Vygotsky 1987: 70)

A number of aspects of this account are noteworthy. There is the accidental nature of the event: it occurred during an experiment, but was not a planned part of the experiment. The account relies on close observation, but this is no straightforwardly objective catalogue of the subject's actions. There is an attentiveness to the interests (Kress 2010, and see chapter 3, above) and agency of the child, and the child's acts are interpreted by the observer, who infers motives and who adduces a causal relationship between the child's words and his subsequent behaviour.

When I first read *Thought and Language*, more than twenty-five years ago, I blithely attributed the subjective, anecdotal character of Vygotsky's accounts of his experiments to the fact that he was writing a long time ago (a notion of historical distance that I have since encountered in school students, for whom 'the old days' can mean anything from the 1960s to the Pleistocene era).<sup>3</sup> But this really won't do. Vygotsky's approach to and presentation of his data are products not simply of his academic background as a literary scholar nor of the stylistic models available to him but of conscious choices on his part. This becomes clear from the most cursory glance at Piaget's *The Language and Thought of the Child* (1923/1977), the work to which chapter 2 of Vygotsky's *Thought and Language* is a direct response, work which is, as Vygotsky acknowledges (1987: 54) explicitly and consciously structured around the presentation of empirical data. Piaget presents, clearly and forthrightly, the qualitative and quantitative data on which his conclusions are based (see, for example, 1923/1977: 82-3) – the 'facts' that are so conspicuously lacking from, or at the most sketchily presented in, Vygotsky's account.

Another example of Vygotsky's approach is provided by his account of the experimental data that underpin 'Tool and Symbol in Child Development':

The records of the experiments carried out with children give a clear picture of syncretism of action in their behaviour. The small child, placed in a situation where the direct attainment of his purpose seems impossible, displays a very complex activity which can only be described as a jumbled

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<sup>3</sup> The version that I read during my PGCE course was, of course, Vygotsky (1962).

mixture of direct attempts to obtain the desired end, emotional speech, sometimes expressing the child's desire and at other times substituting actual and unattainable satisfaction by means of verbal 'Ersatz', by attempts to achieve the end through verbal formulation of means, by appeals to the experimentalist for help and so on. *These manifestations present an imbroglio of actions, and the experimentalist is at first bewildered by this rich and often grotesque mixture of mutually contradictory forms of activity.*

(Vygotsky/Luria in Van der Veer & Valsiner 1994: 117  
[my emphases])

What is foregrounded, it seems to me, by Vygotsky's account is the work of interpretation on the part of the observer/experimentalist: the data of the child's actions cannot easily or straightforwardly be coded, classified (as Piaget had done), without in the process oversimplifying what is actually going on. Vygotsky remains committed to a scientific approach; what he rejects is an approach that is reductive of the complexity of the empirical field. The 'imbroglio of actions' is an inescapable, irreducible fact, a manifestation of the social identity of the subject.

My argument about Vygotsky and method was made twenty years ago by David Bakhurst. In an elegant and persuasive footnote, he observed that Vygotsky

... rarely employs the kinds of tools associated with orthodox experimental psychology: control groups, standardized testing procedures, explicit 'coding schemes' for the interpretation of data, and so on. His empirical research might therefore strike the modern reader as wanting in rigour and objectivity. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that Vygotsky's efforts represent a failed attempt to do experimental psychology as it is now understood. On the contrary, his research strategies were quite deliberately created for the analysis of psychological phenomena as he conceived them. ... Vygotsky holds that psychological capacities can be understood only through an analysis of their *development*. ... Furthermore, Vygotsky believed that the insights gained ... are often best presented by describing

particular cases in detail, rather than giving statistical data for a large sample of subjects. Finally, his sensitivity to the theory-ladenness of all experimental inquiry led him to make no formal distinction in his writings between theoretical and empirical research. His manuscripts therefore read as sustained arguments for a particular theory of mind illustrated to a greater or lesser extent by reference to experimental research. In this, however, he frequently spins the web of theory and experiment so tightly that readers must remind themselves that he is not referring to compelling *thought-experiments* but to actual empirical findings.

(Bakhurst 1991: 83-84)

In a trenchantly-argued essay, Tolman (1999) makes the case for an approach to research that moves beyond the mere context-embeddedness that might be said to inform Yin's definition of the case study (Yin 2003, above). Tolman rejects the increasingly common interpretation of Vygotsky's term, the zone of proximal development, as 'a way in which the teacher can aid the learning of a pupil' (Tolman 1999:75, and see chapter 2, above) on the grounds that this 'completely misses its theoretical intent, which is to reveal the essentially societally mediated nature of human learning' (*ibid.*). Tolman proceeds to indicate the methodological implications of this theoretical position by means of Ilyenkov's (1960) principle of the 'ascent from the abstract to the concrete' and by an example which contrasts Ilyenkov's approach with that of standard Anglo-American empiricist methodology:

Suppose we find ... that school children in some classes, though apparently competent in elementary arithmetic, are having difficulty mastering more advanced arithmetic skills. We note that this problem seems to be distributed not individually but by classes, and therefore we suspect that something the teachers are doing is responsible. Somehow we hit on the hypothesis that teachers' attitudes are important. We divide the teachers into two groups, designated as 'lenient' and 'strict' (independent variable). The



performance of the pupils (dependent variable) is then measured, and we discover a statistically significant correlation accounting for more than, say, 60% of the variance. We conclude that leniency accounts for the poorer skills.

(Tolman 1999:77)

The problem with this approach, Tolman argues, is that the discovery of a degree of correlation between two abstractions (children's performance and teachers' leniency):

... merely create[s] a higher-order abstraction by showing how the relation between the two original abstractions can be generalized. We may repeat the investigation innumerable times, finding no exceptions, even approaching the ideal of universality. Yet we will not come a millimeter closer to understanding what is actually going on. This requires a genetic reconstruction of the concrete, causal dynamic process. The abstractions must be made concrete by finding their real connections within the concrete, integral whole of learning/teaching within the societal process.

(*ibid.*)

Tolman is also very open about the problem that this poses for any discussion of method. Whereas the Anglo-American empiricist approach is 'readily reduced to rules of procedure', the 'Leont'evian', as he terms it, is left without the support of procedural rules: 'The very idea of a fixed set of abstract rules violates the concrete conception of the problem' (Tolman 1999:78). In place of such props, all one has recourse to is 'experience, intuition, and intelligence, coupled with a sound theoretical understanding of the phenomenon under study' (*ibid.*).

What seems to me to be the advantage of Tolman's methodology is that it is attentive to the concrete realities of the classroom; more than this, though, it stakes out a ground that is distinct from an empiricist tradition of research

with which, I suppose, I have a longstanding quarrel (see Yandell 1999). The approach for which Tolman argues is one that accepts that the data that are to be presented are, as it were, fully subjective data - that the research evidence is compelling not because of any notion of replicability but because of the plausibility of the cultural-historical account that is offered. And in this notion of an account is embedded both the act of narrative and – inextricable from this narrative – an interpretation. This might be construed as an argument about the competing claims of reliability and validity – an assertion of the gains in validity that ‘thick’ (Geertz, 1973) or ‘elaborated’ (Brown and Dowling, 1998) description can achieve. It takes up, too, an argument made by Jackson and Marsden more than fifty years ago:

... sociology is often bedevilled by a somewhat naïve view of ‘objectivity’. As human beings studying human groups, all sociologists cannot but experience many complex forms of involvement. The very choice of any research project in sociology inevitably presumes an act of judgement in which personal values and personal history play their own – perhaps deep-hidden – role. The true science lies in recognising this, not in avoiding the terrain where involvement is most perceptible. We jumped in at the deep end, tried to be methodical, tried to be honest, and tried to leave the reader free to redeploy the evidence.

(Jackson and Marsden 1966: 17)

#### *4.5.2 The interpretation of digital video data*

What follows is the analysis of the data I gathered at Wharfside School.

Through this analysis, I attempt to get closer to an adequate account of the ways in which literary texts were read by the two classes I observed, and of the uses to which these textual encounters were put. The data are specific,

local, situated in particular histories. My analysis of them attempts to attend to these specificities because, as Burgess and Hardcastle have argued,

... as long as we continue in our thinking to abstract language from its context in culture and history and to think of it just as language, or as skills, or predominantly a matter of forms, we shall restrict our view of pupils' learning. We shall not attend adequately to the difference which lies in classrooms, whether of class or ethnicity or culture or gender. It is necessary to be specific.

(Burgess and Hardcastle 1991: 46)<sup>4</sup>

Doecke *et al.*, in the 'position paper [outlining] a framework for research on English teaching' (2007: 4), to which I have referred earlier in this chapter, take a fairly disparaging view of the affordances of digital video as a research tool:

We conceptualise classroom observation as an interpretive process, which acknowledges the perspectives of those who may see a classroom differently. We also assume the value of enabling practitioners to view their classrooms outside their habitual frames of reference, sensitising them to the complexities of 'framing' and 'interpretation', and thereby enabling them to see their classrooms differently .... Paradoxically, this is to abandon any notion that classrooms can be 'captured' by employing an array of ever more sophisticated technology, as though an observer can somehow get closer to the 'reality' of classrooms by resorting to audio and video recording. This appears to be the claim made by Kress *et al.* for their 'multimodal (semiotic) approach' to classrooms, which they distinguish from 'the linguistic approach that has dominated so much research on English classrooms since the 1970s' (Kress *et al.*, 2005, p. 3).

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<sup>4</sup> Burgess and Hardcastle's emphases here find an echo in Bakhurst's explication of the two central features of Ilyenkov's dialectical method:

First, the method is *particularist*. That is, it cannot be formulated as a set of general principles neutral with respect to subject. How it must be applied is entirely determined by the specific nature of the subject under study. ... Second, his position is *historicist*, that is, he presents human knowledge as a historical phenomenon, evolving through a relentless process of immanent critique, with each new stage responding to contradictions in the last (Bakhurst 1991: 163).

For all the variety of semiotic sources on which they draw, the standpoint from which they construct their accounts of classrooms remains that of the research team. The voices, bodies and practices of teachers are interpreted from the perspective of the researchers, providing at best a somewhat troubling surplus of meaning that threatens to deconstruct their master narrative of 'English in urban classrooms.'  
(Doecke *et al.* 2007: 14-15)

From the earlier part of this chapter, in which I discuss my role as researcher and my relationship with the teachers involved in the research that I conducted, it should be clear that there is a part of this critique of Kress *et al.* (2005) that I would tend to support. The distance between Kress's research team and the teachers on whose work they report is, I think, much greater than the distance between either Monica or Neville and me: my interpretive perspective is significantly different from the one that informs *English in Urban Classrooms*.

Where I would disagree with Doecke *et al.*, on the other hand, is in relation to the use – and usefulness – of digital video technology. The issue here is not whether the technology can 'capture' the 'reality' of a lesson, whether the video footage forecloses, or renders superfluous, the act of interpretation: it can't and it doesn't. But what it made possible for me as the researcher was significant. It enabled me to revisit a lesson that I had observed, to review and to notice things that I had not noticed in the real time of the lesson. So, to take one example among many, it was only in reviewing the footage of Monica's lesson on 1 December 2005 that I paid attention to Foyzur's intervention in the discussion of *Richard III*. My interpretation of this moment, which is the focus of analysis in chapter 9, prompted me to review the

footage of the lessons that had preceded this one. I wanted to look for moments in the earlier lessons that might plausibly be construed as contributing towards the understanding of Richard's role that Foyzur produced on 1 December.

What makes digital video footage so valuable as a resource in exploring and interpreting classrooms is precisely their complexity, the complexity of the 'social discourse' (Geertz 1973) that flows through them. This complexity is the complexity of multimodal social semiotics: meanings are made multimodally, and, as I seek to demonstrate in the analysis that follows, particularly in chapters 8, 9 and 10, an adequate interpretation of this meaning-making might reasonably be said to rely on the repeated review of the data that digital video facilitates. This is an argument about research method, but it is also an argument about the theoretical field: there is a congruence between my use of digital video data and the theory of the sign sketched out in the preceding chapter (see above, chapter 3).

Digital video technology has also, *contra* Doecke et al, made it possible for me to enable 'practitioners to view their classrooms outside their habitual frames of reference ... thereby enabling them to see their classrooms differently' (Doecke *et al.* 2007: 14). Both Monica and Neville have viewed and commented on some parts of the footage that are analysed in the following chapters. Over the past six years, I have also shared some of these data with a wide range of teacher colleagues: with teachers in Wharfside School; with PGCE students as part of a lecture on classroom; with

experienced English teachers in Cambridge and London; with students on the MA English Education course at the Institute of Education; at conferences, seminars and research symposia. Always, the issue of interpretation has been to the fore: it has been what we have argued about. And my interpretation – the interpretation presented in the remaining chapters of this thesis – has been shaped, modified and refined in these discussions.

#### *4.5.3 The selection of significant moments*

I am particularly interested in forms of pedagogy that enable students to make their own meanings, to contest meanings, to move beyond script and counterscript (Gutierrez *et al.* 1995, and see below, chapter 5). The lessons, and the parts of the lessons on which I have focused attention, have been chosen because they are moments in which students' meaning-making can be observed, moments that reveal something of the pedagogy that encourages and is attentive to such processes.

So these are, in some sense, the moments that I was interested in before I started this research. There are continuities, then, with my earlier work as a teacher and as a researcher: with my earlier accounts of my own practice (Yandell 1994, 1995, 1997b, 2001) and of others' practice (Yandell 2005). But there's a problem with conceptualising the process in this way, in that it doesn't quite allow for the extent to which it is a *process*. My sense of the salience of particular moments was a product of my history, and especially my history as a teacher, but was also constantly being developed by the data,

by what I was observing and the sense that I – and others – were making of it. That is, I was both ‘rely[ing] on prior professional practice knowledge’ and continuing to ‘search for saliences’ – that is, to ‘search for knowledge in and through practice to correct and amend practice in the light of changing circumstances and new perspectives’ (Kemmis 2005: 421).

This search involved understanding Monica’s and Neville’s practice differently, and understanding my own interpretation of their practice differently, because of becoming aware of others’ interpretations, and because of the need to render more explicit the sense that I was making of their practice (and of the video data as evidence of this practice).

There are two other aspects to this question of the selection of significant moments that are worth a mention here. The first is I have discovered that, for me as a researcher, being there matters. Monica and Neville have both, very kindly, supplied me with digital video footage of lessons that I was unable to observe. I have viewed the footage with interest, and it has, of course, supplemented my knowledge of the students’ work, their encounters with literature and with each other. But I would not feel at all comfortable using such footage as my data, attempting to subject it to the same forms of analysis that I have used on video gathered in lessons when I was present. I could, I suppose, justify such reservations fairly easily, on the grounds that I would have only the perspective of the camera and therefore would miss out on the triangulation provided by my own observations in real time, by my awareness of things that happened out of shot. So, for example, in Monica’s

lesson on 1 December 2005, I was able to observe the transmission round the class of Perry's counterscript (see below, chapter 9). But I think there is more to it than that. Is it a not completely rational reservation about the inauthenticity of my position in relation to such data – in other words, some vestigial attachment to the truth-claims of the eye-witness? Or is it – and I think this is plausible – that the video data was always used by me to confirm, extend, enrich, complicate my own sense of the lesson that I had observed? So it maybe is not accurate for me to describe my approach as one that centred on the analysis of video data, since these data were never my starting-point.

I also need to qualify what I have said about the selection of significant moments. I would want to argue that there are interesting things to say about almost any moment of any of these lessons, the lessons that I observed at Wharfside. In other words, I am making a claim that I could have focused attention on other moments, on other students. Entailed in this is the claim that the moments on which I have focused are in important ways representative of other moments, other lessons. (I return to this point in my concluding chapter, below.)



## Chapter 5

### Investigating literacy practices within the secondary English classroom, or where is the text in this class?

To begin to examine how literary texts are read in urban English classroom, I investigate what happens in a single lesson, one that I observed in June 2005, very near the start of my data collection. I make the claim that what happens in the lesson is recognisable as a version of English and of English pedagogy, a version that is underrepresented – indeed, scarcely acknowledged – within the dominant, policy-oriented discourses of literacy and literacy instruction. The description of the lesson, and the literacy practices inscribed in it, is thus linked with an exploration of issues of pedagogy.<sup>1</sup>

As I noted in chapter 3, a great deal of attention has been paid in recent years to literacy practices outside the classroom, while, as Kress *et al.* (2005: 117) observe, ‘little attention has yet been given to the study of literacy practices as experienced by pupils ... in secondary-school English classrooms.’ Kress *et al.* argue the need to observe what does go on in English classrooms, since, despite the extent of regulation by policy, curriculum and pedagogic frameworks, ‘English teachers actively construct their subject day by day, *differently* in the settings of the different classrooms.’

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this chapter appeared in Yandell (2007).

To describe the lesson, I will make use of the multimodal approach adopted by Kress *et al.* (2005, see also Kress and van Leeuwen 2001, Kress *et al.* 2000); to explain what I think was going on in the lesson, I need to refer to the much cited and much contested Vygotskian concept of the zone of proximal development, discussed in chapter 2.

The class, a mixed ability group of thirty twelve- and thirteen-year-olds at Wharfside School, is in the middle of a scheme of work based around Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. In previous lessons, students have read extracts from the first half of the play, up to the assassination of Caesar, using the script of the BBC *Animated Tales* version; they have watched the assassination scene and Brutus' funeral oration from the (1953) Marlon Brando film.

The lesson begins, in accordance with a routine that is departmental policy in the school, with time for individual reading. Without prompting, most students produce a book from their bag, settle at their appointed seat, and start reading. Those who arrive without a book are given one by the support teacher, Morlette. (One student, Billy, is reluctant to sit where he has been asked to, but his attempt to negotiate a different position is half-hearted.) Though scarcely providing sufficient time for any sustained reading, the activity clearly is effective in calming the class, enabling an orderly start to the lesson proper, and possibly reinforcing messages about the value attached to 'private' reading within the English curriculum. This opening provides an interesting contrast with what is to come. Here, for a few minutes, is

something that approximates to the dominant model of reading within our society: each individual communing in isolation with a book that has, to a greater or lesser extent, been chosen by the reader. This is the conception of reading that is inscribed in the National Curriculum's version of English: 'Reading: during key stages 3 and 4 pupils read a wide range of texts independently, both for pleasure and for study' (DfEE 1999a: 49, and see the discussion in chapter 3, above).

Within the secondary curriculum, attention is paid to the breadth of reading experience and there is a recognition of different purposes, 'pleasure' as well as 'study' (though one might wish to question whether these two terms represent a binary opposition, mutually exclusive possibilities, or points at opposite ends of a continuum). In either case, however, such reading is to be conducted 'independently'. In this, the programme of study for the secondary English curriculum continues an emphasis that is also present in the primary curriculum: from the very beginning, reading is associated with independence, an individual practice.

After five or six minutes, Monica, the teacher, takes the register, then asks the students to put their books away. She is sitting on a table at one end of the room. The students are sitting in well-defined groups of three or four; all can make eye-contact with the teacher. In addressing the whole class, Monica's voice is only slightly raised: there is an expectation that she will be listened to, and she is. She says that in the lesson we will be thinking about Brutus and doing some role play; first, though, she says that she wants the

class to think about things that are really important. Religion, suggests one student; Morlette, who is acting as a support teacher in this lesson, raises her hand and says 'Human rights'; 'The right to be gay,' adds Nazrul. This prompts Kemi to talk about the new pope: she doesn't approve of him because of his prejudiced attitude to homosexuality. Monica listens to each of these contributions (as do the other students) but does not make any explicit response. She says that she wants students, in their groups, to talk about violence: 'Is it ever right to use it?' She suggests, quite casually – in a way that might indicate that these issues are already common currency within the class – that they may want to think about situations where a country has been invaded, or about the apartheid regime in South Africa: 'Ms Lindsay might want to say something about that,' she adds, alluding to the fact that Morlette is South African.

And the students do talk. At Billy, Jo and Paul's table, where I am sitting, the conversation stutters into life. They talk about bullying, and how they would respond if a younger brother or sister were being attacked in the playground. Elsewhere, Nazrul's group discusses the situation in the Occupied Territories and the violence of the *Intifada*.

After about seven minutes, Monica stops the group talk and asks for reports from each group. Kirsty talks about the right to use violence to defend one's family. She refers to the recent news story about Abigail Witchalls, a young mother who had been stabbed in Surrey while out walking with her young son (Pallister and Jones 2005). In Kirsty's view, the Abigail Witchalls story is one

that illustrates the need to resort to violence. Chris responds that everything can be talked over, and so violence cannot be justified; Kemi disagrees with Chris's position, arguing that there are times when the only way of dealing with a bully is to confront the bully physically. Morlette refers to the case of Tony Martin, the Norfolk farmer who shot and killed a burglar (Gillan 2000): she says that she thinks he was wrong to do what he did, but she recognises that people have different moments of last resort. Lisa introduces a personal anecdote about the police failing to respond adequately to a violent situation; this encourages Billy to tell the class about his grandmother, who was robbed while she was in hospital, and again the police had not acted as Billy's family expected them to.

It is worth drawing attention to two aspects of this moment: firstly, the space that existed for Billy to tell this story, to be listened to, for this intensely personal family experience – weighed down with the family's sense of their grandmother's vulnerability, her dignity, her particular right to claim assistance from the police – to become part of the lesson, not extraneous to it; secondly, the extent to which Billy's story was taken up by others – it found echoes in other students' experiences of the police not being there when they were needed.

What is striking about this part of the lesson is not just the quality of individual interventions in the discussion or the maturity with which students can signal disagreement with each other – though these features of the students' talk are impressive – but the level of engagement shown by all the students in the

room. This is evident in the quiet seriousness with which each contribution is received. If this is a product and manifestation of the social relationships within the class, it is also something that the class may well have learned from Monica. When a student is speaking, her gaze and posture indicate that she is giving them her full attention; when Perry, a relatively new arrival to the class who seems to find it difficult to stay still and listen quietly to other students, interrupts or distracts other students on his table, Monica's quiet admonitions to him emphasise that he needs to be quiet so that *she* can hear what is being said, and concentrate properly on it. Something of the processes of socialisation that have created this environment are discernible in the lesson itself. In reporting back on her group's discussion, Lisa, who is in the same group as Perry, says, in an entirely matter-of-fact way, that she had started off holding the view that violence was always wrong, but she had listened to Perry and he had convinced her. Similarly, Morlette's contributions to the discussion model what is expected of the students in this lesson, this classroom.

In this part of the lesson, Monica says very little. She ensures that each group gets a turn, and shows that she is listening to what they have to say. When Foyzur offers a rather confused (and confusing) explanation of an Islamic justification for the *Intifada*, reporting that he found this information on a website, Monica merely suggests that he might need to do some more research by checking out some other websites. When someone from each group has spoken, Monica announces that we will come back to this discussion at another time, but now we must turn our attention to Brutus.

There is, thus, no forced closure of the debate, no attempt to resolve or summarise all the contributions; neither is the relationship of this part of the lesson to what follows rendered explicit in any way.

### 5.1 Why did Brutus decide to kill his friend?

Almost thirty minutes of the hour-long lesson have passed before Monica simply poses the question: 'Why did Brutus decide to kill his friend?' She explains that each group will be allocated a part of the play, a key moment in the period before the assassination, and that their task will be to prepare a role-play of that scene. Copies of the scripts are distributed, and each group is assigned their scene (Brutus talking with Portia, Cassius persuading Brutus to join the conspiracy, and so on). At first, the groups rely heavily on the script. Students sit, heads bent over the text, with little obvious interaction within the groups. They locate their section of the script, sometimes unaided, sometimes with help from Morlette or Monica. Some students read a few lines aloud, to the other members of their group. And then, at different moments over the next ten minutes, each group leaves their seats, moves into the spaces between the furniture and begins to improvise their scene. The move is spontaneous, in the sense that it emerges from the group, not in response to a suggestion from the teacher, and it is accompanied by a marked shift in the relationship of the students to the roles that they are playing. Leaving the scripts behind, they are able to use the resources of movement, pose, gesture and gaze as they begin to inhabit the characters. Kirsty and Jenny become versions of Portia and Brutus, versions informed

and inflected by the girls' knowledge of other married relationships, whether their parents' or the representations of adult male-female relationships in soap operas or films or cartoons. Kirsty's Portia maintains a physical distance from Jenny's Brutus that enacts her displeasure, her anger and disappointment in Brutus for his failure to share his thoughts with her; Jenny, in turn, guilty because of this silent breach of trust, cannot meet Kirsty's eye. Billy and Jo work together on the scene in which Cassius first raises the possibility of the conspiracy with Brutus – and Billy finds a linguistic register but also a way of holding his own body that seem more Brutus-like than I could possibly have anticipated.

In these role plays, there is a doubleness to what is going on. On the one hand, students are drawing on experiences and emotions that are part of their own subjectivities – bringing themselves into the lesson, as it were. How this happens is also worth dwelling on: each group starts with the script and then moves away from it as the group members begin to inhabit the roles; each group starts sitting down, the scripts prominent in the interactions within the group, scripts guiding and structuring these interactions. Then, at different moments in each of the groups, the students get up, start to draw on other semiotic systems (gesture, movement, pose, expression) as they construct the interactions between Cassius and Brutus, Brutus and Portia, and so on. Does this movement into theatrical spaces – if that is what they are – enable students to draw on other resources, other possible ways of being the character, other roles and possibilities? This is where the other part of what is going on seems to rise to prominence, as students relish the



opportunity of being someone else. The moment is one which allows for continuities with experiences beyond the classroom while also providing students with the liberating potential of an alternative persona or identity. In this lesson, there is Nazrul's Caesar, whose elaborate costuming effects have been created with two tops zippered together to create an impromptu toga; there is Kemi as Cassius, playing Brutus for the self-important fool that he becomes under the spell of her sly persuasion; there is Billy as Brutus, assuming a more public – almost pompous – manner of speech, quite distinct from the register he uses for normal classroom interactions; and there is Kirsty as Portia – both wifely and resolutely refusing to be patronised or excluded by Brutus. In all these cases – and many more – there is the pleasure of playing another person that I have described elsewhere in writing about a different class's experience of reading *The Demon Headmaster* (Yandell 2005; see also Barrs 1987, Gee 2003, on the liberating potential of adopting roles).

In the final ten minutes of the lesson, the groups get to perform their role-plays, with the rest of the class as audience. Before each group begins its performance, the students arrange themselves in a freeze-frame that is intended to capture the essence of their scene, and Monica photographs them.

## 5.2 Heteroglossia, classroom scripts and ways of reading

Gutierrez, Rimes and Larson (1995) have explored the ways in which power is constructed between the teacher and students. Using Bakhtin's (1981)

concepts of dialogic meaning and social heteroglossia, they present a view of the classroom as 'inherently multi-voiced' and suggest that 'social heteroglossia, or the inherently intertextual and interdiscursive nature of social interaction, is not only a feature of novelistic writing, but a feature of the world' (Gutierrez et al. 1995: 446). Their observation of classroom interaction leads them to argue, however, that in most classrooms what is produced is a 'rigidly monologic teacher script', through which the teacher's power is maintained and in which the 'dominant cultural values' are reflected.

While some students contribute to and participate in the teacher script, those who do not comply with the teacher's rules for participation form their own *counterscript*. In this context, members of the classroom community hold varied expertise in the form of local knowledge, but the inscribed knowledge of the teacher and classroom regularly displaces the local and culturally varied knowledge of the students.  
(Gutierrez et al., 1995: 446-7)

It is easy to see a parallel between the monologic practices described by Gutierrez et al. and the 'scaffolding' version of the ZPD inscribed in the Key Stage 3 Strategy. The assumption, for example in the *Literacy Progress Units* (DfEE 2001d) from which I quoted in chapter 2, above, is that students' acquisition of (approved) literacy depends on the elimination of error and compliance with rules. In such contexts, it is, perhaps, not surprising that 'counterscripts' have proliferated – counterscripts that are experienced by teachers as disruptive and anti-educational.

In place of the unproductive, discordant coexistence of monologic teacher script and disaffected student counterscript, Gutierrez et al. propose a 'third

space' – a place which seems to bear more than a passing resemblance to the fully social, dialectical version of the ZPD outlined by Daniels (see chapter 2, above):

The only space where a true interaction or communication between teacher and student can occur in this classroom is in the middle ground, or 'third space,' in which a Bakhtinian social heteroglossia is possible. Conceiving the classroom as a place for social heteroglossia reveals the potential for the classroom to become a site where no cultural discourses are secondary. Acknowledging the inherent cognitive and sociocultural benefits that come from the multiple discourses is of particular importance, especially in classrooms populated largely by African American, Latino, and mixed-race students.

(Gutierrez *et al.* 1995: 447)

As an example of the teacher's monologic script, Gutierrez *et al.* provide a 'current events' quiz in a ninth-grade classroom. There is, it seems to me, a direct and illuminating contrast between the cultural practices of the quiz, where the teacher asks questions about stories selected from that day's *Los Angeles Times*, in which the teacher defines knowledge in such a way as to construct the students as ignorant, and the ways in which 'current events' are introduced into Monica's lesson. In the lesson that I observed, no single source or script is privileged to the exclusion of others – though Monica does question the reliability of Foyzur's internet-based sources. The world is allowed into the classroom, not as a prepackaged entity but as material to be constructed, interrogated and contested within the dialogic discursive practices of the classroom. Thus Kemi's fierce criticism of the Pope builds on Nazrul's assertion of gay rights, and Monica introduces Morlette's autobiography – her experiences in South Africa – as potential subject-matter

for the class's exploration of violence. When I listened to Nazrul and his group talking about the situation in the Occupied Territories, it was clear that Nazrul saw Palestine as different from the cases cited by other students, where violence was construed as legitimate if it were a direct response to, a reciprocation of, equivalent violence (defending one's friend in a playground fight, standing up to bullies, and so on). What Nazrul was arguing was that the *Intifada* was justified because of the *general and historical* denial of Palestinian rights by the state of Israel. I would want to argue that this represents a more developed, more political, view of violence within a nexus of historically situated power relationships – not fully articulated, perhaps, but there nonetheless.

Curriculum, as social heteroglossia, is a constructed text, a mosaic of the multiple texts of the participants; it is the social practice of the classroom. Redefining curriculum as social practice forces the abandonment of monologic instruction and provides the social and cognitive rationale for including and constructing multiple forms of knowing.

(Gutierrez *et al.* 1995: 468-9)

The lesson that I observed has to be understood in the context of the history of the teacher's relationship with the class (the argument that was made in chapter 2, above). Monica had been teaching the class since the beginning of Year 7 – so for nearly two years. What one sees in one lesson is the product of, or stands in a relationship with, the students' collective experience of other lessons in which they have participated in similar activities. In discussion after the lesson, Monica suggested that lessons such as this one can only be achieved with a class that the teacher has 'trained up' since Year 7; qualifying this, though, was her recognition that classes have their own identities, that

this is a good class – which is a way of gesturing at the social dynamics of the group, the class's sense of its own identity. Monica talked of a girl who had been in the class until her family moved out of London, a girl with Tourette's syndrome. She told of the girl's behaviour, of how upsetting other students found it but how they had accepted it over time. The story is about the class's – the students' – inclusive attitudes and behaviours, but it also reveals Monica's sense of the history of the class, its (social) development.

For me as an observer, the characteristics – and the quality – of this lesson were thrown into sharp relief by the fact that this was the eighteenth lesson I had observed in a three-week period, and all the others had been taught by students on the initial teacher education course on which I taught. The fundamental contrast here is not one of competence but rather of the widely differing timescales involved – and hence of the difference in the classroom relationships established. Continuity is an enabling condition – it permits the possibility of the development of a relationship, of shared experiences and expectations becoming part of the discursive fabric of individual lessons (Freedman 1995).

I indicated at the start that what I observed in this single lesson seems to me to be a recognisable version of English. I am reminded of Tony Burgess' (1984) description of a series of lessons in another East London comprehensive school, the best part of a quarter of a century ago, lessons in which 'the activities of literature are constructed from within deepening and elaborating classroom discourses' (Burgess 1984: 59). In urban classrooms

in the USA, likewise, the practices recorded by Suzanne Miller (2003) and by Carol Lee (2001) share important points of correspondence, in the sense of development over time, in the respect with which students' contributions were treated, in the collaborative construction of richly intercultural meanings and understandings, with the practice that I observed in Monica's classroom.

All of this might appear to have very little to do with the reading of *Julius Caesar* – and yet, it seems to me, it is fundamentally important in determining the character of that reading. What is constituted in these interactions is the social arena of the classroom, the social relationships of the classroom, not as preconditions for reading/English/work but as inextricably bound up with the experience of subject English. More specifically, the first part of the lesson creates the parameters, the fields of reference and of relevance, for the reading of the text. It announces that students' views, experiences, knowledge of the world outside and of the social relations within and beyond the classroom, are implicated in their reading. And that links with something else identified by Monica after the lesson – the fact that the class is enjoying *Julius Caesar*. Is there a connection between the seriousness with which the students are treated in their English lessons – the fact that they are expected to discuss things that matter and discuss them in an 'adult' way – and their enjoyment of 'adult' – both difficult and high status/elite culture – texts?

Whatever else this lesson is, it cannot be construed as an exercise – it is not presented as a preparation for something else, as a way of honing students' skills of debate or role play, but rather as the thing itself (Edelsky 1996; Moll

and Whitmore 1993). And this also suggests a link with Vygotsky's tendency to look at development through the lens of problems/problem-solving: the complexity of language and learning – the complex relationship between the two – is tested (and visible) in contexts where participants are presented with problems. So here what Monica does is to suggest that the lesson is part of an investigation of Brutus: Brutus is a problem to be explored. Why did he decide to kill his friend? It is significant, too, that the question is posed by Monica in these terms – not why did he kill his friend, even, but why did he *decide* to: the emphasis is placed on an intellectual process, on how the decision was made. This approach is common to both parts of the lesson: each is introduced by Monica posing a question. Also significant, perhaps, is that this is the only explicit or marked commonality: there is no – inevitably reductive – attempt to articulate the relationship between the two halves of the lesson, save only in the structural parallel: a question is posed, and then students are invited to explore answers to it.

Of course, it would be possible to construe these activities and the lesson in which they were situated not as literacy practices but as something else – as 'speaking and listening' (in the jargon of the National Curriculum, a separate attainment target, not to be confused with reading [DfEE 1999a]). For only a few minutes in the hour-long lesson were students in Monica's class focusing their attention directly on the printed words of the script of *Julius Caesar*. And yet every part of the lesson functioned to create the opportunity for students to explore the play and to collaborate in the construction of a reading of it, a reading that paid attention to its dynamic and difficult interplay of

perspectives, its movement between personal and political, a reading that amounted to full engagement with the text. It is important, I think, to stress that what the lesson demonstrated was that there simply is no necessary connection between accessibility and dumbing down. This was not a twenty-first century equivalent of *Lambs' Tales*, not Shakespeare domesticated or trivialised (Bottoms 2000), but a way of reading that enabled students to draw on a vast array of social semiotic resources to make the text meaningful.

The question posed by the second title to this chapter alludes to Stanley Fish's *Is there a text in this class?* (1980). I have already indicated, in chapter 3, something of what seems to me to be problematic about Fish's concept of an interpretive community, though I would want to argue that the Year 8 class that I observed was indeed acting as – had become – an interpretive community. The text that they were reading, though, was not one that was instantiated merely on the pages of their partial scripts of *Julius Caesar*; in the course of the lesson, the text was read as it became, as it were, productively multimodal – its multimodality, instantiated in talk, in movement, in gesture, in the images of the tableaux, inextricably linked to the meanings that the class produced.

Wertsch et al. (1993) draw a contrast between the passive responses that are required of students in most classrooms and situations where more active participation is demanded. In the latter, as in Monica's classroom, learners:

... are required to take on an increasingly active responsibility  
for the strategic processes involved in reading



comprehension precisely because they are required to participate in intermental functioning by ventriloquating through a social language that presupposes their taking on cognitive authority.

(Wertsch *et al.* 1993: 349).

Learning is happening in the semiotic work of Monica's students – in their interactions, not (merely) in their heads. And in this process, the text of *Julius Caesar* is being remade: it is a sign that 'maintains its vitality and dynamism and the capacity for further development' (Vološinov 1929/1986: 23, quoted in chapter 2 above) precisely because of this remaking in the intersection of different accents, different interests.

## Chapter 6

### Exploring multicultural literature: the text, the classroom and the world outside

In this chapter I want to do three things.<sup>1</sup> First, developing an aspect of the discussion of literature and reading position that was explored in chapter 3, particularly in relation to Nafisi's *Reading Lolita* (see 3.5.3, above), I will discuss the notion of multicultural literature. What is meant by the term? What is it, and where did it come from? Second, developing one of the themes from the previous chapter, I want to look further at the relationship between texts, teachers and school students. And third, again touching on an aspect of the previous chapter, I want to glance at the world beyond the classroom, to suggest ways in which the literature read and written in the classroom can contribute towards students' understanding of and engagement with the wider world. In exploring these questions, I will be exploring the categorisation of literature enacted in policy, and how policy envisages that different categories of literature will be read differently, for different purposes. I will be comparing what policy has to say on these matters with the ways in which texts that might be construed as multicultural are read in particular classrooms, by particular groups of students.

#### 6.1 A brief history of multicultural literature

So what is multicultural literature? It certainly didn't exist when I was at Oxford in the late 1970s and early 1980s – by which I mean that I spent

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this chapter appeared as Yandell (2008b).

seven years within the English Language and Literature faculty without ever being troubled by any awareness that there was such an animal as multicultural literature. In 1985, I started work as a schoolteacher, in a boys' comprehensive in Tower Hamlets. One of the first texts that I chose to read with my Year 8 group was *Young Warriors* (1967). The novel, by Jamaican author V. S. Reid, tells a coming-of-age story of five Maroon warriors who help their people to outwit and ambush the occupying Redcoat army. At this distance, I do not know why I chose it – whether it was to do with the boys' adventure story format of the novel, with its anti-imperialist narrative and positioning, whether it seemed to be accessible enough, to my highly inexperienced eyes, for my students to be able to cope with it (whatever coping with it might mean). I asked my students to look at the front cover, to describe what they could see and then to predict as much as they could about the novel they were about to read (Figure 6.1). It's an interesting exercise, both as a way of activating students' prior knowledge and as an opportunity to render explicit some aspects of the conditions of literary production. The content of the image – the foregrounding of the Maroon boys, the adoption of their perspective on the advancing Redcoats, the extent to which the image represents a particular moment in the novel – all provide useful ways in to the written text, productive foci for the students' conversation. But there are also issues about the style of the illustration – the use of primary colours, the lack of individuation in the four Maroon figures in the foreground (and maybe even the problematic, racialised stereotype of the Maroons in the treetops). When students returned to the front cover after reading the novel, many felt that the

illustration marked a dumbing down of the content, a means to market the text as 'safe', unthreatening, childish.



**Figure 6.1**

What immediately attracted the attention and interest of my first Year 8 group, however, was not the front cover but the back, and more particularly the photo of V. S. Reid in the centre of it (Figure 6.2).

IMAGES REDACTED DUE TO THIRD PARTY RIGHTS OR OTHER LEGAL ISSUES



**Figure 6.2**

'Who is this?' they asked. I explained that this was the author. What was completely clear from my students' responses was that, for them as for me, encountering black authors was something of a novelty. The class was almost entirely composed of students of Bangladeshi origin. There was an identification on their part with the author; but what was the basis of this identification? It was not a product of language or geography or religion or ethnicity, in any straightforward sense. It was not, in other words, an issue of any narrowly-defined identity politics. But the students' obvious surprise – and pleasure – was related to their sense of themselves, like V.S. Reid, being defined as 'other' by the dominant culture in which they lived. They understood, I would argue, that in a clear, political sense they were Black.

Is there, then, a very simple definition of multicultural literature? Is it just a way of referring to literature written by Black authors? What, though, of the subject-matter of such literature? Is it also an element in the multicultural identity of *Young Warriors* that it tells a story of Maroon people? And what of the presence of the white Redcoat soldiers in the narrative? Does the fact that the novel enacts a conflict between organised groups of runaway Maroons and the colonial power make it more multicultural? To put it another way, would it have been a less multicultural text if Tommy and the other warriors had restricted themselves to hunting coneys?

Versions of multiculturalism had been given prominence in education even before my time at Oxford had begun. There is in the Bullock Report a recognition of the relevance of students' out-of-school identities and experiences to what happens in the classroom (see above, chapter 1).

Such pluralist notions were always contested. Barely a year after the publication of the Bullock Report, the speech that James Callaghan, the then Prime Minister, made at Ruskin College, signalled an agenda for education that has continued to dominate the discourse of policy throughout the intervening three decades: the focus on basic skills, on standards and reductive versions of accountability has left little space for more nuanced considerations of curriculum and pedagogy. Shortly after I had started work in Tower Hamlets, the Bullock Report's commitment to more locally accountable, student- and community-centred approaches was effaced in official discourse by an entirely different model of the relationship between

students' lives and identities outside school, on the one hand, and, on the other, the school curriculum. When the consultation paper on the National Curriculum was published (1987), it used the language of progressivism, the language of difference, in a statement of entitlement that denied any curricular space for the exploration of difference, of subjectivity. This was, quite explicitly, to be a one-size-fits-all curriculum, one that ensured:

... that all pupils, regardless of sex, ethnic origin and geographical location, have access to broadly the same good and relevant curriculum and programmes of study.

(DES 1987: 4)

In this paradigm, the school curriculum, detailed in the programmes of study, derives its validity not from its responsiveness to local interests but from its universality. And, if the curriculum is to be 'broadly the same', little space is left for any serious attention to be paid to what Bullock termed 'the language and culture of the home.' The key word here is 'regardless': local differences – of gender, history, culture – are to be disregarded. Equality of opportunity is to be delivered through access to a homogenous, preformed entity, the already-specified curriculum. One might be permitted to wonder about the meaning of 'relevant' in this context. Relevant to what, or to whom? What does such relevance look like? This formulation has, nonetheless, been massively influential. If one enters 'curriculum' and 'regardless' as link terms in an internet search engine such as Google, one finds hundreds of UK school websites, all of them proclaiming their commitment to providing a curriculum that is beneficial precisely because it is delivered 'regardless' of the identities and specific characteristics of its students.

Perhaps part of the reason for this universalist curriculum promise/premise is that it distances schooling from the dangerously controversial territory of identity politics while simultaneously colonising the language of equality of opportunity. What could be more egalitarian than a commitment to a common curriculum? And what, at the same time, could be more comforting to those who fear social fragmentation and who regard the curriculum as a means of both asserting and re-establishing a single, national identity?

The centralised model of the curriculum, promoted by the 1987 consultation document and by the earlier HMI *Curriculum Matters* publications (DES 1984), continues to underpin the most recent policy pronouncements around the theme of 'personalisation', to the extent that personalisation has been carefully defined as a set of increasingly individualised interventions to ensure access to the same pre-specified curricular goals (see above, chapter 1).

And yet, of course, even for those most vehemently committed to a notion of a curriculum that is 'good' because it pays no regard to the histories of the students to whom it is to be delivered, the plain fact of actually existing social diversity cannot be avoided completely. So, from the earliest incarnation of the National Curriculum there has been a small plot labelled 'multiculturalism'. It appeared in the first version of the National Curriculum for English in the 'Programmes of Study for reading', in the instruction that at key stage 2:

The reading materials provided should include a range of fiction, non-fiction and poetry, as well as periodicals suitable



for children of this age. These should include works written in English from other cultures.

(DES/Welsh Office 1990: 30)

In the National Curriculum Council's 'Non-statutory Guidance' that accompanied the publication of the first version of the National Curriculum, the section on literature contains this advice:

Texts should reflect the multicultural nature of society, including home-language and dual-language texts.

(NCC 1990: D2)

In the version of the National Curriculum that was current at the time of my data collection, there is the following statement of entitlement:

**Texts from different cultures and traditions**

- 3) Pupils should be taught:
  - a) to understand the values and assumptions in the texts
  - b) the significance of the subject matter and the language
  - c) the distinctive qualities of literature from different traditions
  - d) how familiar themes are explored in different cultural contexts [for example, how childhood is portrayed, references to oral or folk traditions]
  - e) to make connections and comparisons between texts from different cultures

(DfEE 1999a: 49)

It is worth comparing this with the preceding section:

**English literary heritage**

- 2) Pupils should be taught:
  - a) how and why texts have been influential and significant [for example, the influence of Greek myths, the Authorised Version of the Bible, the Arthurian legends]
  - b) the characteristics of texts that are considered to be of high quality
  - c) the appeal and importance of these texts over time

(*ibid.*)

When exploring texts 'from different cultures and traditions', the student is placed in the role of cultural anthropologist; when encountering the 'English

literary heritage', it would seem that awe and wonder are more appropriate responses. The assumption is that the student will encounter difference in reading texts from different cultures, but will be inducted into her or his own 'heritage' in worshipping at more canonical shrines.

This schematic distinction is tendentious, to say the least. The National Curriculum website from which I quoted earlier lists as 'major writers from different cultures and traditions' Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams alongside Athol Fugard and Wole Soyinka, Hemingway and Steinbeck together with Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiong'o. Meanwhile, the 'major playwrights' named as part of the 'English literary heritage' include Congreve, Goldsmith, O'Casey, Shaw, Sheridan and Oscar Wilde.

Among post-1914 writers of fiction, there is James Joyce; among the poets, Sylvia Plath. What I am not doing here is requesting a re-classification exercise, a literary equivalent of the bureaucratic madness of the apartheid regime in South Africa. What I am suggesting is that such lists are inevitably arbitrary. A line is drawn between what is part of an 'English' tradition and what belongs elsewhere.

When school students begin their GCSE courses, they find in their English *Anthology* a section headed 'Different Cultures' (AQA 2002: 5-18).<sup>2</sup> In the earlier versions of the *Anthology*, this was entitled 'Poems from Other Cultures and Traditions' (NEAB 1996: 17-28, NEAB/AQA 1998: 17-26). If one

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<sup>2</sup> I focus on the AQA examination board's GCSE English syllabus (specification A), which is followed by 60 per cent of UK candidates. See [www.jcq.org.uk/attachments/published/397/JCQ%20GCSE%20Results.pdf](http://www.jcq.org.uk/attachments/published/397/JCQ%20GCSE%20Results.pdf), and [www.aqa.org.uk/over/stat\\_nat.php](http://www.aqa.org.uk/over/stat_nat.php) (both accessed 24/9/07).

visits the examination board's website, one can find a FAQ (frequently asked questions) page, which includes the following:

**What is the difference between 'different cultures' and 'other' cultures?**

None. 'Different' is defined as being synonymous with 'other'. This change was introduced with the changed subject criteria in September 2001

([http://www.aqa.org.uk/qual/gcse/eng\\_a\\_faq.php#faq3](http://www.aqa.org.uk/qual/gcse/eng_a_faq.php#faq3), accessed 18 September 2007).

Despite the examination board's assurance that the two terms are synonymous, the change might be regarded as progressive – a recognition, at any rate, that the ascription of otherness to certain cultures makes an assumption about the cultural positioning of the reader. The move is, nonetheless, a slight one: the *Anthology* continues to operationalise the National Curriculum's distinction between the canonical and the multicultural, and all that unites the poems selected for inclusion in the 'Different Cultures' section is difference. The *Anthology* encourages – demands – particular ways of reading the poems contained therein. They are stripped of history, of specificity. Does it matter that Tatamkhulu Afrika's 'Nothing's Changed' (AQA 2002: 6) was written in the immediate aftermath of the end of apartheid in South Africa? Or that Achebe's 'Vultures' (AQA 2002: 10) moves from the lived experience of the Nigerian Civil War to pose a more universal question about the ethical status of 'kindred love'? Apparently not. 'Vultures,' bizarrely, is accompanied by an illustration of vultures, as if, somehow, it should be read as a nature poem.

The problem of all anthologies is that they are someone else's selection, and that, in consequence, the meaning of the anthologised text becomes determined by the anthologist's criteria for inclusion. This tendency becomes much more acute when the reader's response to the anthologised texts is to be assessed through an examination question. When the anthologist chooses thematically, or historically, or geographically (war poetry, Mersey poets, or whatever), there is some room for manoeuvre on the part of the reader, some space in which the complexity and the uncertainty of the relationship between the text and the world beyond the text might be negotiated. In this section of the *AQA Anthology*, though, cultural difference is the sole criterion, and in its wake are dragged some fairly disreputable assumptions about culture and identity. If these are poems from different cultures, then, presumably, there is a one-for-one correspondence between the poem and the culture which it represents – the culture that it is, so to speak, 'from.' Culture thus becomes like a replica football kit, an instantly recognisable index of affiliation: the badge signals membership that is, simultaneously, inclusive and exclusive: one poem, one poet, one culture. Such a view of culture – stable, single and essentialist – would be questionable in any context. What makes it seem positively perverse is that many of the poems contained in the *Anthology* problematise precisely these assumptions, as they enact within themselves processes of cultural negotiation and contestation, exploring shifts in identity and cultural positioning and relating these shifts both to global historical processes and to individual subjectivities.

## 6.2 'Half Caste': contested readings, contested identities

What happens when these poems are read in the classroom is shaped by the immediate context of the *Anthology* and the overarching context of the GCSE examination. Sometimes, nevertheless, school students' (and even teachers') purposes are less narrowly instrumental than these contexts might suggest. I want to turn now to describe what happened when one of the *Anthology* poems, John Agard's 'Half-Caste' (AQA 2002: 13) was read in Wharfside School, in April 2006. In analysing what was happening in the lesson, I want to indicate the importance of approaches to teaching and learning that are attentive to the cultures, histories and subjectivities of the learners. I also want to draw attention to the complexity of the processes involved in the reading of (multicultural) literature in the urban classroom.

It is a mixed ability Year 10 English class (fourteen- and fifteen-year-olds), halfway through their GCSE course. They have just started work on the 'Different Cultures' section of the *Anthology*, and Agard's is the first poem that they will study. Before looking at the poem, however, their teacher, Neville, asks them to devise an improvisation:

[08:15]

**Teacher:**... it can be about anything you like, anything, but it must end with the two words, someone saying the two words, 'Excuse me' and preferably a freeze frame, because I know how good some of you are at drama, you know how to use body language and gestures ... if you can end with 'Excuse me' and a freeze frame, that's exactly what I want.

(transcript from videotaped lesson, 21 April 2006)<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Subsequent quotations in this chapter are from the transcript of the same lesson, unless otherwise indicated. In this and in subsequent chapters, excerpts from transcripts of video data are prefaced by an indication of the time that had elapsed since the start of the lesson, and hence of the videotape.

After ten minutes of rehearsal, groups of students present their role plays to the class. Jamal's group creates a newsreader's desk, signifying a studio, at the front of the room, from where the anchorman introduces Patrick as the roving reporter, interviewing a football manager. Patrick's questions about the team's recent poor results is met by an angry, defensive and dismissive 'Excuse me.' Amina's group goes next. She and three other girls of Bangladeshi heritage organise themselves into two pairs who encounter each other in the undefined public space – a corridor, a street – that the classroom has become. Neither pair can give way, and the slight physical contact of their meeting is accompanied by this dialogue:

[23:30]

**Sarah:** What?

**Amina:** Why're you barging us for?

**Sarah:** You're the ones who's barging us

**Amina:** Excuse me, bitch

Amina's last word, delivered with particular emphasis, is lent even more power by the fact that it breaches the rules of the game that Neville has established – the instruction that the role play should end with 'Excuse me.' Mutib's group has devised a scenario in which Salman has a met a girl (Susan) whom he fancies. His attempts to chat her up are interrupted by the arrival of Mutib, who informs Salman that the girl is his sister. 'Excuse me!' says Salman, with an exaggerated politeness that is belied by body language that indicates that no ground will be conceded.

After the presentations, the teacher encourages his students to think about the different ways of saying 'Excuse me' that they have explored. Mutib comments:

[32:20]

**Mutib:** it's like manners ...you say excuse me instead of swearing ... it's a way of showing that you're angry without swearing at him or shouting or saying anything that might upset him

Tariq reminds the class of Mutib's much earlier suggestion, that 'Excuse me' could be 'flirty,' and Neville asks Mutib to explain what he meant by this:

[34:50]

**Mutib:** say I was a girl, and a man come to me and put his hand like on my leg and that if, if he was ugly you'd say 'excuse me,' [raises pitch of voice, rising intonation, signalling rejection] like, but if he was good-looking you'd say 'excuse me' [again raises pitch of voice, this time attempting to sound seductive, interested]

**Salman:** no you wouldn't, I wouldn't

Was Salman contesting Mutib's view of women, his assumption that a woman's response to physical harassment would vary according to her judgement of the man's appearance? Or was he contesting the generalisation, Mutib's confidence in speaking for all women? Or was he uncomfortable with Mutib's gender-switching performance? I don't know. What does emerge from these moments is a sense of how much the students already know about the layered nuances of language, how it is used to enforce and contest power relationships and how these exchanges are situated in a dense web of culturally-specific, multimodal meaning-making. As Vološinov argues:

*Verbal communication can never be understood and explained outside of this connection with a concrete situation.* Verbal intercourse is inextricably interwoven with communication of other types, all stemming from the common ground of production communication. It goes without saying that word cannot be divorced from this eternally generative, unified process of communication. In its concrete connection with a situation, verbal communication is always accompanied by social acts of a nonverbal character ... and

is often only an accessory to these acts .... Language acquires life and historically evolves precisely here, in concrete verbal communication, and not in the abstract linguistic system of language forms, nor in the individual psyche of speakers.

(Vološinov 1929/1986: 95, emphases in original)

Vološinov's argument with Saussurean linguistics, discussed in chapter 2 (above), helps to illuminate the tensions between the abstractions of policy (instantiated in the National Curriculum and in the GCSE syllabus) and the concreteness of classroom interactions: the latter exemplify Vološinov's concept of an 'eternally generative, unified process of communication'.

The students' improvisations, and the discussion arising out of them, seemed ideal preparation for reading Agard's poem. The students, given time and space to investigate and imagine other scenarii in which 'Excuse me' might carry a heavy semantic load – and the opportunity to draw on their knowledge of sites beyond the classroom – arrive at the poem already sensitised to the multiaccented, socially determined character of the sign.

When Neville puts a new slide on the IWB (interactive whiteboard), there is an immediate, explosive response to what is displayed – the title of the poem:

[38:13]

**Malcolm:** that is so racist, that is so racist

**Teacher:** Malcolm, do you want to say a bit more

**Malcolm:** no I don't want to say a bit more, that is so disgusting, despicable

**Mutib:** you might as well call someone a Paki or something, it's the same thing

**Malcolm:** I don't care – I don't know what it means, anyway



It matters, in this exchange, that Malcolm is a mixed-race student and Mutib is of South Asian heritage: it matters, but what they say is not explained by such facts. There is, in their reaction, genuine outrage; equally, there is a *performance* of outrage. The outrage and the performance are both equally inseparable from the context of the classroom, from the fact that the offensive words have appeared on the IWB and hence are part of the formal script of the lesson: outrage enables the students to contest the power relations of the classroom, to stand in judgement on the text that they are supposed to be reading, rather than be judged by the accuracy, sensitivity or plausibility of their reading of it.

When the uproar subsides, Neville perseveres with an exploration of what the title might mean. It becomes apparent that there is not a consensual view on this:

[40:17]

**Teacher:** Malcolm, I would like you to say if you agree with what Tariq says this means

**Malcolm:** what did he say?

**Teacher:** Tariq-

**Tariq:** when somebody, when you call someone a half caste it may be a different religion, or they might be, they might have two religions, two backgrounds

**Gavin:** you can't have two religions

**Tariq:** {you can

**Salman:** {course you can, your mum might be a Muslim and your dad might be a Christian

**Gavin:** well *you* can't have two religions

**Salman:** yeah, I know, that's what I'm saying

In the current climate of licensed Islamophobia, it is not surprising that Tariq, a relatively recent arrival from Afghanistan, should foreground religious identity, or difference in religion, as the primary line of divide. He is quite clear, too, about the force of the term 'half caste': 'when you call someone a

half caste' directs attention to the context for the utterance, a context where the label is attached by another as a term of abuse. In the ensuing debate, countering Gavin's insistence on an individual's brand loyalty to a single religion, both Salman and Tariq show an awareness of religious affiliation as socio-cultural, historically produced and situated.

The matter, though, is far from settled, and it is Malcolm who re-opens the debate:

[46:37]

**Malcolm:** What's the difference between mixed race and half caste? Is mixed race just the colour of your skin?

**Teacher:** Does anyone want to answer that?

**Tariq:** mixed race is when you are from, when you have two backgrounds, when your father, your dad is from one country and your mum is from another, like me from London and --

**Salman:** no, it's not, though, mixed race is two different, like your mother being a different colour from your dad

**Tariq:** that's what I just said

**Salman:** no, you didn't, you said backgrounds, as in countries

**Tariq:** yeah, that's what I mean, backgrounds and -

**Salman:** {no

For Tariq, 'race' only makes sense in terms of history, origins, background; for Salman, on the other hand, it is all a question of skin colour. Neville lets the discussion run for a while. Gavin and Salman explore whether someone with one white and one Chinese parent should be categorised as mixed race. Gavin, who is white, thinks not, presumably because he associates the term only with the children of liaisons between white and black (African or African-Caribbean) people. Salman convinces him that the term is more elastic, but maintains a distinction between 'race' and nationality ('you could be white Chinese though'). Neville encourages the class to explore this further:

[48:29]

**Teacher:** is a race anything other than a colour? could you have two people of the same colour who were different races?

*[murmurs – confusion – then]*

**Mutib:** yeah – Indian and Pakistani

**Teacher:** OK, Mutib, tell me about that

**Mutib:** well, I don't know, that could be like half caste, or it could be like normal, because brown is brown

**Teacher:** OK, Ben and Sarah, we'll come to you in a moment, I want you to take Mutib's idea, if someone has an Indian mum and a Pakistani dad, are they mixed race?

*[a mixture of yeahs and nos]*

Mutib suggests that the answer to the question might be arrived at by consulting a dictionary, or by searching on the internet. (In effect, he is making an appeal to the higher linguistic authority that Vološinov argues does not exist: Mutib pins his hopes for a resolution of this difficulty, momentarily, on language as a stable, already-defined, system of signs. But the sign is being re-made in the course of this dialogue.) Salman, meanwhile, makes explicit the connection between his sense of himself – the identity which he wishes to present – and his definition of mixed race:

[49:16]

**Salman:** I'm British but I'm black, I'm born in England, I've lived in England the rest of my life, and from my passport, I'm British – that's just like you could say a British man and a British woman, but er I'm still thingy, I'm still black and if I was to go fuck some white bird and have some mixed race kids, they're gonna be mixed race, innit

Mutib's response is both diplomatic and thought-provoking, as he insists on the contingency of all such labels:

[49:40]

**Mutib:** yeah. For a black person and a white person, that's mixed race, innit. But if there's an Indian man and a Pakistani woman, then for them that's mixed race.

**Gavin:** no, if they're the same colour, it's not mixed race

*[there is a pause – a long one – silence: there's a lot of thinking going on]*

**Mutib:** that's a hard one, man, innit

The conversation continues. Malcolm attempts to explore a hypothetical question that is, simultaneously, a way of teasing Salman about his insistence on his British identity:

[50:05]

**Malcolm:** Say if Salman, I dunno where he's from, Nigeria, wherever

**Salman:** no, no

**Malcolm:** Kenya

**Salman:** NO

**Malcolm:** Congo

**Salman:** NO!!

**Malcolm:** Angola

**Salman:** NO not Angola!

**Teacher:** Malcolm, why don't you ask him?

**Salman:** –Britain, man, England!

**Malcolm:** All right, England, then. Say if someone was born Nigeria, right, and like the bird was born Kenya, and they had sex, does the child, it wouldn't come out mixed race?

Rebecca talks about having an English mother and an Irish father, and Malcolm responds by making a distinction between culture and race: in his view, Rebecca's heritage is culturally mixed, but not racially. Martin, however, voices uncertainty about whether this is, in practice, an absolute distinction. Gavin shifts the terrain – while also returning the discussion to what is going on in Agard's poem – with an appeal to the common sense view of other people's perceptions:

[51:35]

**Gavin:** see when people look at you, they don't turn round and say you're mixed race, do they – they say you're white ... because people wouldn't walk down the street and say Martin was mixed race even though he might have, I don't know, a German dad or a Polish mum or something like that.

Gavin, who is white, is a powerful and often somewhat truculent presence at the back of the room. What he says here is, in some sense, nothing more or less than the truth, the truth of the categories that operate beyond the school gates, on the streets of East London. But these categories are neither neutral nor unproblematic, either in the world outside or in the classroom. The 'people' to whom Gavin refers are, presumably, people like him: he shares their confidence in deploying the categories of race to determine others' identity. It is not coincidental that Gavin found it difficult to accept Salman's examples of different versions of 'mixed race' such as Chinese/white: for Gavin, the superordinate categories are white and black. He has some distance to travel, I suspect, before he could acknowledge the justice of Agard's ridicule of such external, reductive ascription of identity. But at least, in this lesson, the students' dialogic enquiry into the category of 'race' opens it up for further perusal.

In the course of the discussion, neither Gavin nor anyone else in the room has been expected to 'cast off the language and culture of the home,' in the words of the Bullock report (DES 1975). It matters, too, that Neville, their teacher, is Black, and that he is prepared to talk to the students about his parents' background in Goa and his sense of his own cultural identity. He is a participant in the dialogue:

[52:36]

**Teacher:** So here's a question. I've told you about my background yesterday, didn't I. My family, parents would describe themselves as Goan .. but all I know is London, and England

**Salman:** so you class yourself as British

**Teacher:** so what if I were to go to Goa, and have a child with someone who had only known Goa, would the child be mixed race?

*[several 'no's']*

**Teacher:** ... but my culture would be entirely different because all I really know is London

The debate has continued to acknowledge, indeed to be structured around, the students' sense of their historically situated identities. There is nothing cosy about this. Mutib's insistence on the relevance of the divide between India and Pakistan to the subject under discussion involves him (and his peers) in strenuous intellectual work at the same time as demanding considerable resources of diplomacy: he manages to disagree with Gavin, to suggest that Gavin's notion of what mixed race means is too narrow to be universally applicable, without causing offence. Equally, students are prepared to tease out the inconsistencies and silences in their peers' presentation of self – as when Malcolm prods Salman to acknowledge his African heritage.

From one perspective, Salman's insistence on defining himself as British – and not as African – can be seen as analogous to Tariq's earlier presentation of himself as 'from London' or to Amina's feisty, assertive role-play persona ('Excuse me, bitch'). It is not possible simply to read off students' classroom identities from data on their histories, their heritage, their home identities. The selves that they perform in the classroom are inflections of those other, out-of-school identities, and, as such, they can legitimately be construed as indications of the students' agency and of the classroom's potential as a site within which different versions of the self can be fashioned and experimented

with. Individual students' room for manoeuvre should not be exaggerated, though. There is powerful pressure on them to produce approved versions of their identities. Within the classroom, as in the outside world, the new arrival has a lowly status. There is a strong urge to belong. How could it be otherwise in a society where government and mainstream media habitually present both refugees and migrant workers as a problem, as drains on the nation's resources? And these, too, form the concrete situation within which the students' utterances must be construed: no wonder, then, that Salman insists on his Britishness and Tariq presents himself as a Londoner.<sup>4</sup>

And, in this situation, 'making students feel good,' as Ken Boston (2007) puts it, seems really rather important as an aspect of the teacher's role. Nor is it easy to see how Boston's adherence to 'formal teaching' would have achieved what Neville has managed to achieve here. There is much more to be done if all the students in the class are to understand what Martin is already reaching towards, in his suggestion, made after listening to Agard's performance, that Agard's 'Excuse me' has an element of 'retaliation – like he's taking the confusing points and using them against him.' There is, equally, more work to be done if the students' everyday concepts of race, culture and ethnicity are to be brought into a dialectical relationship with more scientific understandings of these terms. (Whether all of this work would best be accomplished in the English classroom is not clear: both history and

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<sup>4</sup> I was working on this chapter on the day after Gordon Brown's first speech as Prime Minister to the Labour Party Conference, a speech in which there were eighty references to Britain and Britishness – and a speech which contains the line, 'I stand for a Britain where it is a mark of citizenship that you should learn our language and traditions' (<[http://www.labour.org.uk/conference/brown\\_speech](http://www.labour.org.uk/conference/brown_speech)>, accessed 25 September 2007). The shift from first to second person and back again is as interesting as the assumptions about language and traditions.

science departments might have contributions to make. But perhaps I am dallying with the disciplinary boundaries that Ken Boston was so keen to maintain.) The claim that I am making, though, is for the importance of the work that was being done in Neville's classroom in this lesson, work that enabled the students to begin to grasp Agard's poem while also grappling with questions of identity and difference that continue to exert a shaping influence on our society. This is, it seems to me, the work of cultural production (and contestation), to which I alluded in chapter 2 (above).

### 6.3 The world beyond the classroom

When I started teaching in London, a novel that was widely used as a class reader in London schools was Beverley Naidoo's *Journey to Jo'burg* (1985). Telling the story of Naledi and Tiro, a sister and brother who travel from their village to Johannesburg to find their mother, a maid for a white family, so that she can return to the village and save the life of her youngest child, the novel lays bare the grotesque, savage inequalities of the apartheid regime. And that, of course, was the point. English teachers chose to read it with their classes for reasons that lie beyond the approaches to 'texts from different cultures and traditions' proposed by the National Curriculum. Educating London school students about apartheid South Africa was both a contribution to antiracist education and a natural extension of the ethical commitments that have historically shaped English teachers' conception of their subject and, in particular, of the role of literature.



These same ethical commitments have underpinned teachers' selection of class readers from Hans Peter Richter's *Friedrich* (1961/1971) to, more recently, John Boyne's *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (2006).<sup>5</sup> Whatever other – aesthetic – criteria may have been in play, part of the justification for such choices was, without doubt, teachers' sense of the importance of teaching about the Holocaust. Now, some English departments are beginning to explore Elizabeth Laird and Sonia Nimr's *A Little Piece of Ground* (2003). Set in the Occupied Territories, it tells the story of Karim, a Palestinian boy from a middle-class family in Ramallah, and his friendship with Hopper, a boy from the nearby refugee camp. Their shared passion for football takes them to the 'little piece of ground' of the title, the stretch of wasteland where they play together until their games are interrupted by the arrival of an Israeli tank. The makeshift pitch thus functions as a synecdoche, standing for the state of Palestine itself, as the novel attempts to represent the impact of the occupation on the lives of ordinary Palestinians. Such multicultural texts demand a place within the English curriculum, not for the anthropological interests recommended by the National Curriculum but for reasons of solidarity. It is the rationale provided by Atticus Finch in that classic – if deeply problematic – piece of multicultural literature, *To Kill a Mockingbird*:

Atticus stood up and walked to the end of the porch. When he had completed his examination of the wisteria vine he strolled back to me.  
'First of all,' he said, 'if you can learn a simple trick, Scout, you'll get along a lot better with all kinds of folks. You never

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<sup>5</sup> See also Vicky Obied's (2007) account of the use of Brecht's magnificent sonnet, 'Emigrant's lament,' as part of an English department's contribution to Refugee Week in an East London school.

really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view —'

'Sir?'

'—until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.'

(Lee 1960: 36)

Solidarity, quite distinct from sympathy, is the recognition of common interest: 'your struggle is our struggle.' It is the movement from the binary opposition of 'I'/'not I' to the collective point of view. And Atticus's prescription of empathy is, perhaps, the literary route whereby this broader perspective might be attained.

As Atticus Finch's words indicate, such claims for the power of literature are nothing new, and an adequate account of how (and why) literary texts are read in urban classrooms must not neglect this dimension of the reading experience. What this chapter, particularly in the section that focuses on the discussion of 'Half Caste' among Neville's students, has sought to emphasise is the need to attend equally carefully to the points of view, the positions, of the readers. This emphasis is explored further in the following chapter.

## Chapter 7

### **Class readers: exploring a different *View from the Bridge***

... the written word travels gratifyingly farther than anything else and can be invested with surprising new meanings, some that illuminate the writer to himself (Miller 1987/1990: 350)

Very often a child writes badly because he has nothing he wants to write about (Vygotsky 2004: 46)

#### 7.1 Different readers, different readings

The survey of literary theory and of ethnographic approaches to literacy in chapter 3 indicated the widespread acceptance of the proposition that different readers read the same text in different ways. Texts, likewise, are not considered as stable repositories of authorial meaning; they have become slippery shape-shifters, holding up a mirror not so much to nature as to the reader. Reading is semiotic activity, the construction of meaning motivated by the interests of the reader; reading is a process in which the whole subjectivity of the reader is implicated (Kress 2010, see chapter 2, above). Each reading is thus necessarily gendered, racialised, historicised: the product of a specific historical subject, reading in a specific historical context.<sup>1</sup>

What happens, though, when different readers, different readings meet? At worst, there may be sound and fury and little else, as rival theoretical positions and idiosyncratic interpretations bounce off each other like marbles in a jar. Richard Levin (1979) long ago poured scorn on the academic

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this chapter appeared as Yandell (2006).

competition to produce new readings of old texts. At best, however, a new reading can illuminate for all of us aspects of a familiar text that had previously escaped our notice. Edward Said's (1983) reading of *Mansfield Park*, say, enables other readers to attend more carefully to Sir Thomas Bertram's trips to Antigua – and to grasp the significance of geography as an organising principle in Jane Austen's novel. Said's reading stands, moreover, in an explicitly dialogic relationship to Raymond Williams' reading of Austen in *The Country and the City* (1973). Said argues that Williams seriously underestimated the extent and importance of global imperialist concerns in English literature from the sixteenth century onwards (and also that Austen's morality is not, as Williams maintained, separable from its socioeconomic basis). That there might be a relationship between Said's own history and his desire to broaden the horizons of Williams' analysis is not reductive of either's contribution: it is to recognise the particularity of each reader's interest, to understand each reading as necessarily and inevitably motivated.

Are some readings, then, better than others? Are some, indeed, permissible and others illicit? And if so, what are the criteria by which they are to be judged? Plausibility? Internal coherence? Impact? Other, more tacit criteria? Just as important, whose criteria are to be used, and how do these criteria operate?

## 7.2 Does different mean worse?

In this chapter, I want to address these questions in relation to an English lesson in Wharfside School and to return to Neville's Year 10 class whose discussions of 'Half Caste' were the focus of the preceding chapter. Before I

do so, however, I want to indicate some possible parameters of this discussion by reference to an incident that occurred over twenty years ago, at the boys' secondary school in East London where I had just started working as a teacher. In an end-of-year examination, students were asked to read a poem by Robert Service:

### **Yellow**

One pearly day of early May  
I strolled upon the sand,  
And saw, say half-a-mile away  
A man with gun in hand;  
A dog was cowering to his will,  
As slow he sought to creep  
Upon a dozen ducks so still  
They seemed to be asleep,

When like a streak the dog dashed out,  
The ducks flashed up in flight;  
The fellow gave a savage shout  
And cursed with all his might.  
Then I stood somewhat amazed  
And gazed with eyes agog,  
With bitter rage his gun he raised  
And blazed and shot the dog.

You know how dogs can yelp with pain;  
Its blood soaked in the sand,  
And yet it crawled to him again  
And tried to lick his hand.  
'Forgive me, Lord, for what I've done,'  
It seemed as if it said,  
But once again he raised his gun:  
This time he shot it - dead.

What could I do? What could I say?  
'Twas such a lonely place.  
Tongue-tied I saw him stride away,  
I never saw his face.  
I should have bawled the bastard out:  
A yellow dog he slew;  
But worse, he proved beyond a doubt  
That - I was yellow too.

(Service 1979: 21-22)

The students' reading of the poem was assessed through a series of comprehension questions. Even at this distance, it is possible to reconstruct the reasons why my colleagues had chosen this text: it has a strong narrative line, dealing with guns, dogs and death; there is nothing complicated about its poetic form; its language is, for the most part, accessible. At the same time, there is an introspective quality and an emphasis on moral responsibility, both of which could be construed as instantiating central values in the experience of reading within the school English curriculum. So, perhaps, the choice of text both implies a set of values and assumes a particular subjectivity in the reader(s): the choice constructs the (adolescent) masculinity to which the text is supposed to appeal.

When I came to mark my students' exam papers, I encountered a problem. Most of the students in my class were of Bangladeshi heritage. Some had been born in the UK; most had not, and a significant proportion were relatively recent arrivals in this country. In the context of the bizarre literacy practice of the examination, where students were expected to commune in complete isolation with a previously-unseen text, they had encountered a false friend, the word 'yellow.' For my students, yellow denoted a colour: connotations of cowardice were a thing unknown. The more confident, adventurous readers moved from initial attempts to link the title with the location (the yellow, sandy beach) to theories of the salience of racial identity: perhaps, they speculated, the poetic persona was Chinese. For all of them, though, their ignorance of the intended meaning of 'yellow' rendered futile their attempts to arrive at a meaningful reading of the poem. There is a long and rather dishonourable tradition, in staffrooms and in the pages of the

education press, of mockery of the howlers perpetrated by examination candidates. What had happened in this case, though, is an example of a much more serious blunder on the examiner's part – an unwarranted assumption of shared meanings that vitiates the whole process of assessment. Another way of presenting this incident is to say that my students struggled because they lacked the appropriate linguistic/cultural capital (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). What is problematic about this is the fact that lack of familiarity with a single lexical item made the whole text inaccessible – and so the chosen poem was not, in the current parlance, fit for purpose. Because my students did not know that 'yellow' could mean cowardly, they read the poem differently. Although it would be true to say that they made different sense of it, I have to acknowledge that such a statement strikes me as perverse. Their readings were not just different – they were flawed and inadequate. (There is a kind of empirical evidence to support this judgement. After the exam, when I explained that yellow was associated with cowardice, my students instantly discarded their earlier readings: better informed, they read the poem differently.)

The story of 'Yellow' indicates a tension that is present across educational sectors in the ways in which the reading of literary texts in particular is framed. It picks up the threads of the discussion in chapter 3 (above, 3.4) of the Wordsworthian values that inform the dominant paradigm of reading and response to literature. On the one hand, teachers value students' engagement and originality. We want students to make texts their own, to enter into the act of reading on their own terms, to read the text through the prism of their own lifeworld. On the other hand, we know that there is stuff

that they need to know if their readings are to be adequate, informed, meaningful. Sometimes that knowledge is lexical; sometimes it relates to the formal and generic properties of the text (how sonnets or science fiction work); sometimes it is about the conditions of a text's production (Jacobean theatre or Victorian novels, say); and sometimes it is knowledge of wider cultural, social, political, economic and intellectual history: Swift's *A Modest Proposal* is more, as well as differently, meaningful if the reader knows something of the history of British imperialism in Ireland.

Sometimes, too, we seem to act as if the story of 'Yellow' were paradigmatic of all differences in reading – as if all such differences were merely the product of differential access to the right sort of knowledge – as if different readings were simply better(-informed) or worse(-informed) readings. My observations of Neville's Year 10 class at Wharfside School challenge such assumptions.

### 7.3 Class positions in reading *A View from the Bridge*

I want to focus on a single lesson, but before turning to the reading that happened in the lesson it is necessary to sketch out some of the contexts in which that reading happened. Indeed, to describe the circumstances of the reading as contexts is itself problematic to the point of being misleading. It suggests that the reading is in some way separable from the contexts in which it occurs, when part of my argument is that the act of reading is shaped and informed by networks of interlocking, inextricably linked con/texts (see the discussion of social theories of the sign, from Vološinov to Harris, in the first part of chapter 2, above).



It has become fashionable to make reference to the importance of student voice. What happens, though, when the student voice expresses resistance to the exigencies of assessment criteria and exam boards? How is the teacher to reconcile the imperative to produce coursework, to get through the syllabus, with his principled commitment to education that is open, accountable and dialogic?

At the start of the lesson there is a moment that is both wildly atypical and deeply revealing. It is early March: Neville, in his first year of teaching, has worked hard in the previous six months to establish a relationship with this very diverse, very challenging group of fourteen- and fifteen-year-olds. He is trying to convince the students that they should complete – or at least attempt – the homework tasks that he sets:

[05:11]

**Teacher:** OK, I'm going to say a couple of words about this homework, I've asked Mr B- to come in and say a couple of words about this homework as well

**Rebecca:** Who?

**Teacher:** Mr B-, he's the head of English, because the last time I set a homework, three people did it, and I didn't get any homework from anyone else after despite asking, this is absolutely serious, the homework isn't optional, I don't know what you think I do with homework but I do not set it just to keep you busy, my interest isn't in keeping you off the street, it's crucial, crucial to what we're doing that you do this bit of homework, hopefully, before the end of the lesson Mr B- will come in and say a few words about what will happen if you don't, but it seems to me that for some reason I have done something with you that makes you think you don't need to do the work.

(10 March 2006)

This is Neville at his sternest. More than this, though, it's uncharacteristic of his approach that there is an attempt to use the hierarchical structures of the

school to persuade his students to produce their assignments. But it doesn't quite work:

[05:58]

**Darren:** sir, why did you say '*hopefully*' he'll come?

**Teacher:** because he's teaching at the moment and it depends whether or not he gets a moment

**Darren:** so why're you *hoping* that he'll come?

**Teacher:** [2 seconds] because I think that something that's happened is that you seem to think when I set you work it doesn't matter I want you to realise that it does, so I've asked someone else to come in and tell you that it does

**Darren:** what, because you can't control us, you have to bring in someone else?

**Teacher:** is it control, is it a question of control? or a question of you taking the work seriously?

**Darren:** question of status

**Teacher:** [1 second] definitely there is status involved, I'm asking the head of department to come and talk to you

[3 seconds] OK, what we're going to do today is we're going to finish reading.

(10 March 2006)

Darren, like many of his classmates, is intrigued by Neville and his way of being, a way of being that is deeply respectful of students' views and identities, a way of being that leaves a space for – indeed, invites – students to scrutinise the usually taken-for-granted purposes and inequalities of classroom interactions. There are, then, continuities with past conversations in Darren's attentive discourse analysis – but there's also an edge to it, an impatience with the perceived evasion of Neville's first response to the interrogation of 'hopefully', a forensic skill in peeling aside the surface niceties of timetabling issues to the heart of the matter: the work of the English classroom, Darren insists, cannot be divorced from questions of power, of status. 'What is to be done?' is here displaced by 'Who decides what is to be done?' (It is, of course, perfectly possible to see Darren's intervention as

nothing more than a disruptive tactic. But what does that mean? What order is being disrupted – and wherein lies the legitimacy of the order that he challenges?)

Before the class can start to read the remaining couple of pages of *A View from the Bridge*, they need to resolve the issue of who is to read Catherine's part:

[09:45]

**Teacher:** ... so we'll start from Catherine's reaction to Eddie saying this, um [pause] would anyone like to be Catherine – Mutib's absent?

[4 sec pause]

**Salman:** Mutib will always be here in our hearts

**Teacher:** Amina, can I ask you?

**Amina:** No

**Teacher:** You were a great First Officer yesterday

**Amina:** I wasn't.

(10 March 2006)

And what follows is a discussion, lasting over a minute, as to who is to read Catherine's lines, before, eventually, it is decided that Sarah will. This is a classroom where roles, within and without the play, are negotiated. It is a time-consuming and a messy business. At one point, Susan says, 'Sir, you're the teacher, you decide.' But that is not how things are done here. Mutib is absent from the lesson in a fairly specialised sense: he is in the exclusion room, a place where he spends, it would seem, a fair amount of time. Salman's elegiac comment is delivered for comic effect, but the layers of irony cannot quite conceal a truth about the identification of student and role. The part has become Mutib's, and so the reluctance to replace him might be attributable to a sense that to do so would be a theft. I do not mean that students are unable to distinguish between the roles and their extratextual selves – of

course not. But there is in their reading of the play a relishing of the opportunity to inhabit the character, and a possessiveness about the role that they have chosen, or that has been allocated to them.

Further evidence of this is offered a few minutes later when Salman, who is reading Marco's part, remarks, with complete matter-of-factness, to the student who is reading Eddie, 'No, it's all right, I'm going to shank [colloquial for stab] you anyway.' There is a playfulness about Salman's identification with the role, a relishing of the power that this will give him – and of the impunity with which, in role, he can utter such threats to another student. I wonder, too, how much Salman's cool assumption of another identity in the classroom might be attributable to his familiarity with the multiple identities of the video games he plays – and discusses with his peers (Gee 2003).

When the hurly-burly's done and the reading of the play is finished, Neville wants to focus on Alfieri's role. He prompts Matthew to repeat the point he had made in the previous lesson, to the effect that Alfieri reports on Eddie's story because Eddie is no longer in a position to be able to tell it himself. What Neville is working towards is an exploration of Alfieri's choric role. He re-reads, to the class, Alfieri's final speech. As he finishes reading, Darren intervenes:

[26:25]

**Darren:** why is it called *A View from the Bridge*?

**Teacher:** great question, what else could it be called? [5 seconds] based on that last bit that I've just read, what else might you call the play? [3 seconds] whose story is it? [2 seconds]

**Darren:** Alfieri's

**Teacher:** Alfieri's story about?  
[3 seconds]

**Salman:** [shouts] Eddie  
**Teacher:** why Eddie in particular?  
**Salman:** snitching  
**Teacher:** it's a story about snitching  
**Salman:** Loyalty  
**Matthew:** not snitching  
**Teacher:** how do you mean, Matthew?  
**Matthew:** like the story about Billy whatever.

(10 March 2006)

Salman's take on the play as a tale about snitching has a history (and a morality) attached to it. When I started observing the class, they had finished reading (and watching the Baz Luhrmann film of) *Romeo and Juliet*.

Discussing with other students on his table the question of who was responsible for the lovers' deaths, Salman was vehement that Benvolio was to blame. 'Why?' I inquired. 'Because he grassed Romeo up to the Prince.' As far as Salman was concerned, what Benvolio had done in providing an accurate account of the fights in which Mercutio and Tybalt had died was, quite simply, wrong – a fundamental breach of ethical values. To divulge to a representative of judicial authority – of the state – information about violent acts that one has witnessed is not, for Salman, the duty of every citizen but rather the behaviour of a reprobate: it is an offence against the code of loyalty. I could not tell how much Salman's reading of the play was influenced by Luhrmann's representation of the Prince of Verona as an American chief of police. But his reading cannot be dismissed as aberrant or wilful, particularly when it is a reading that took place in a city where so many citizens lack confidence in the forces of law and order.<sup>2</sup> What this earlier

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<sup>2</sup> See for example, two reports in the *Guardian* newspaper, both published a few months after the observed lesson: one (Jeevan Vasagar 19 June 2006) is headlined 'Thousands march with family raided by police', the other (Will Woodward, 27 June 2006), 'Police have no right to rush into action on dubious intelligence, say most Muslims in poll.'

moment also suggests is that the class has a collective history of exploring issues through their shared reading of texts, and, perhaps, particularly through texts in which ethical conflicts are realised in and through drama.

(After the lesson, Neville explained to me that the interpretation of Benvolio as the villain of the piece had not originated with Salman but with Claudia, a girl who had since left the school. In class, she had reacted with outrage to the scene in which Benvolio talks to the Prince, expressing the same views which I had later heard from Salman. Rather oddly, none of this judgement survives in her writing about the play: in her exercise book, responsibility for the tragic deaths is attributed, more conventionally, to Friar Laurence and to Lord Capulet. One might speculate whether Claudia was aware of 'mainstream' interpretations, and of the desirability of conforming to them in written assignments. Or was it that it was harder for her to explain, in writing, a reading that drew its strength from a moral code that she might assume was not shared by her reader, the teacher? Or had she just changed her mind?)

Qualifying Salman's 'snitching' with his suggestion that Miller's play is a story about '*not* snitching,' Matthew is emphasising that this is, in his view, a play with a moral. This is the significance of his reference to the story of Vinny Bolzano ('Billy'), told to Catherine by Eddie and Beatrice as a warning of the dire consequences of speaking to the Immigration Bureau: Matthew proposes that *A View from the Bridge* carries the same message.

The space provided by this conversation allows students to explore, assemble and develop their readings of the play.

[27:03]

**Salman:** it's a story about how it was in those times ...

**Teacher:** can you relate that to Darren's question?

**Salman:** what was Darren's question?

**Teacher:** what was your question, Darren?

**Darren:** what does *A View from the Bridge* mean?

**Teacher:** what does it mean to give somebody a view?

**Sarah:** like, their point, your opinion

**Teacher:** your point, your opinion

**Salman:** no, a view, something for them to see

**Teacher:** OK, so keep thinking about how this works, your point, your opinion, something for them to see, Darren, what do you think, so you think this is beginning to answer your question? [4 seconds] a view from the bridge, this is how things are from [3 seconds] this is how things are from the Brooklyn Bridge, it's a view from *the* bridge, there's only one bridge,

**Matthew :** they're talking about what the view is, like it's an everyday thing

**Teacher:** sorry, Matthew

**Matthew:** it's like it's an everyday thing ... it's like this is what it's like, it's an everyday thing [shrugs shoulders]

**Teacher:** thanks, Matthew, do you know what this is reminding me of? Our very first lesson on this play, where we were talking about Eddie coming home, taking off his cap and jacket, and Gavin was saying, that's just a normal thing, it's the normal thing he does, and I wrote on the board, 'normal, everyday thing' [miming the act of writing]

(10 March 2006)

There are important things going on here. It is worth emphasising Neville's skill in orchestrating the discussion, his tolerance of the long pauses that are signs not of boredom but of the necessary spaces for thinking, his ability to reflect back to the students the length of their engagement with the play. He seizes the opportunity presented by Darren's question about the title of the play and uses it as another way of thinking about how the story is told, about Miller's dramatic technique and the mediating role of Alfieri. And, equally, we should pay attention to the students' contributions, to what they know and to the serious intellectual work that they are doing. As Nystrand *et al.* argue:

In an ideal dialogic learning environment, especially in open discussion as opposed to tightly cast recitation, teachers treat students as potential sources of knowledge and opinion, and in so doing complicate expert-novice hierarchies.

(Nystrand *et al.* 2003: 140)

And yet, Darren still is not satisfied. As Neville continues to explore the significance of the title, Darren interjects: 'I think Alfieri makes no sense, man, he don't make sense to me.' What Darren means by this needs to be unpicked carefully. One strand of his response concerns the issue of narrative and dramatic technique. At first, his position might appear to be one of naïve realism – an attack on an implausibly omniscient choric narrator. 'How,' he asks, 'does Alfieri know all this detail?' How can Alfieri be privy to events that occur behind closed doors – the closed doors of the tenement where Eddie and Beatrice live? But Darren's dissatisfaction with the title re-emerges here in a form that reveals more clearly its origins in his problem with Alfieri:

[29:52]

**Teacher:** ... so Alfieri talks about it all as if it is in the present tense, he appears, narrates something that's happened, he was involved because he bailed out Marco and Rodolpho, he was involved because he was there at the end, he was involved because Eddie came to see him

**Darren:** way you was talking like he was there in the house

**Teacher:** he was, wasn't he, {so what does that mean?

**Darren:** {he weren't, weren't in the house, so this this title don't make sense then if your view, you're viewing from the bridge, you ain't seeing no detail are you?

**Teacher:** sorry Darren

**Darren:** said, like, if they're saying it as a view from the bridge, if you're viewing from a bridge, it's not much detail is it?

(10 March 2006)

What my transcript fails to capture is the way Darren speaks in this part of the lesson. There is an angry urgency about it that explains the interruptions of



Neville here: he's not, in these exchanges, trying to be rude, or to challenge Neville's teacherly authority: he is struggling to communicate his idea – and what he is challenging is not Neville's authority but Alfieri's. It is, in part, the intensity of Darren's interest here that makes me reluctant to construe this as merely a discussion about dramaturgy. What Darren is contesting, I think, is not only the question of verisimilitude (how could Alfieri be privy to these events?) but also – centrally – Alfieri's privileged perspective. Who's telling whose story is, for Darren, a class question. When he complains that Alfieri 'makes no sense, man,' the words he uses draw attention to Alfieri's speech – speech that marks him out as different from, detached from, the other characters.

Darren's problem with Alfieri is explored further as the discussion about the title continues:

[31:24]

**Teacher:** Darren, what if it were called a day in the life? A day in the life of Eddie Carbone? What might that mean?

**Matthew:** everyday things that Eddie does

**Darren:** it would make more sense, innit

**Teacher:** how, how would that make more sense? [4 seconds]

**Darren:** cause, I dunno, it would just make more sense than this

(10 March 2006)

'Make more sense': Darren's words here echo his first attack on Alfieri.

Despite Neville's promptings, though, he does not expand on or explain what he means by this. I will return to this point later, but first I want to track the continuing discussion:

[31:50]

**Teacher:** these are {really

**Amina:** {why the bridge, anyway?

**Teacher:** anyone got any ideas?

**Salman:** yes! A view from the other side of the side of the world from the Brooklyn Bridge, I mean, like bridge, a lead way into this is my city, a view from the bridge, you don't, not, it may look good, but that's not the half of it

**JY:** so, Salman, what's on the other side of the bridge? If where Eddie and the rest of them live is what the play is looking at, what's on the other side of the bridge?

**Darren:** Sicily

**Teacher:** if you call out you're denying Salman a chance to think

**Darren:** I'm not denying

**Salman:** immigrants looking at ... in the beginning, the other half of it

**Teacher:** Tariq

**Tariq:** on the other side are people who are rich, yeah, so I think when the immigrants come from Sicily to New York they pass under it, so that's why there's a view from the bridge ...

(10 March 2006)

Amina's question is unusual. Her interest in the official business of the lesson is often, it would appear, fairly minimal; again, what the transcript does not capture is her tone of voice, which might best be described as insistent, almost angry. In the various suggestions that are made as answers to Amina's question, there is an awareness of the gulf, economic as well as geographical, that separates Sicily and New York within the world of the play. But there is also, less fully articulated, an exploration of New York as a city divided along class lines. It is this sense of the bridge that Neville brings to the fore by asking students to consider the two different cover illustrations on the edition of the play that they are using (Miller 1955/1995)<sup>3</sup>:

[33:06]

**Teacher:** thank you, Tariq, we've got two totally different book jackets here [holding them up for the class to see] I think that these book jackets give us two different sides of the

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<sup>3</sup> The different covers are from different issues of the Heinemann Plays edition of *A View from the Bridge* (Miller 1955/1995): no information is provided as to the date of the issue with the redesigned cover.

bridge, have a look at them, you may have one in front of you  
 ... what can you see on one side of the bridge?

(10 March 2006)

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Figure 7.1

The cover of the newer edition is a photographic image. In the foreground is the water, beyond it a waterfront with high-rise buildings; the point of view is only slightly above the water line, and directly underneath the bridge, which looms above. The whole image is monochrome, variations in ochre – almost as if the landscape were bathed in a soft, golden light.

The older edition represents a 'classic' tenement, with its lattice of fire escapes; above there is a blue sky, while in the foreground intersect two huge black steel girders. It is reminiscent of Miller's description of the set for Peter Brook's 1956 production of the play:

The play began on a Red Hook street against the exterior brick wall of a tenement, which soon split open to show a basement apartment and above it a maze of fire escapes winding back and forth across the face of the building in the background.

(Miller 1987/1990: 431)

The newer cover might, then, be construed as representing the city as aspiration: seen from afar, its towering buildings signify wealth, development and opportunity. The older cover is, in contrast, Alfieri's view of Eddie and Beatrice's tenement: it may have prompted Darren to start thinking about Alfieri's perspective and positioning, the outsider who is somehow allowed a privileged view inside the tenement – and even inside the psyches of its inhabitants.

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Figure 7.2

Prompted by Neville's question, students report what they can see:

[33:26]

**Sean:** crap buildings and good buildings

**Teacher:** OK, crap buildings and good buildings, all right, what did we call this kind of housing?

**Amina:** That's the view and {that's the bridge

**Darren:** {poor side and the rich side

**Teacher:** good, and which side are we on? which side are the characters living on?

**Amina:** on the other, the blue side [referring to the dominant colour of the older cover]

**Teacher:** that's right, do you remember the tenement housing, all the housing that's crammed in, people living in no space, illegal immigrants, very little space ...

(10 March 2006)

And Sarah, picking up the thread of a conversation from an earlier lesson, reading the scene in the first act where Marco explains to Beatrice about sardine-fishing, reminds us of the possibility of reading the sardines as emblematic of the constrictions of life in the slum:

[33:54]

**Sarah:** like sardines

**Teacher:** like sardines, thank you, to go back to that bit of the play, sardines, you never think sardines swim in the sea [3 seconds] it's, I feel that my job at the moment is a bit difficult

**Matthew:** I think I know what he means by that

**Teacher:** Tell me, go on

**Matthew:** I think he means, you wouldn't think that many people could live in these small houses

**Teacher:** good, that's exactly it, they're squished in there [gesture to demonstrate the packing of sardines in a tin]

**Amina:** Like sardines.

(10 March 2006)

As evidence of learning, evidence of Neville's success in creating a classroom environment in which talk is productive, in which students can engage fully with the play, in which meanings can emerge over long spans of time, this is impressive. Neville's practice recalls that described by Suzanne Miller:

Teachers who mediated the discussion successfully listened well, providing support carefully when it was needed – after waiting to see whether other students might provide a next step or move. These teachers showed continual respect for students' emerging new abilities, allowing room for students to take responsibility for posing and pursuing questions.

(Miller 2003: 296)

Within the lesson, it encourages Neville to elaborate an account of the play, and of Alfieri's role within it, that provides students with a context of theatrical history:

[35:20]

**Teacher:** I've not figured out how to do this, but a lot of the reasons for the things we are talking about is to do with Greek tragedy, erm, which Tariq picked up and mentioned in the introduction, I'm not sure how to open this up, Becky, can you stop that, but the ancient Greeks, a bit more than two thousand years ago, they kind of invented drama, instead of just reading out poetry they had people acting it out and they had certain rules for where it was and the person, like the prologue in *Romeo and Juliet*, who explained what happened, also took part in the action, just like Alfieri does, he narrates it, and he takes part in it, in Greek tragedy all the action happened in real time I think .. so you'd see this play, *Salman*, where there were no breaks, no leaps from one time to another at all, it all happened [gesture] and it would be about immovable objects and unstoppable forces, people coming to terms with something they couldn't come to terms with, and *A View from the Bridge* is written like that, as a Greek tragedy.

(10 March 2006)

What is happening in this moment is, from one perspective, the transfer of cultural capital. What Neville knows about the history of Western drama enables him to place Alfieri's role – and Miller's intentions – in a specific context. There would be a way of presenting the students' responses to the play as partial, naïve, uninformed: thus what Alfieri says 'makes no sense' to Darren because he does not understand the mediating (and simultaneously distancing) role of the chorus, because he is not reading *A View from the Bridge* from a position of knowledge about a set of (very largely uncinematic)

dramatic conventions. Neville is, in this account, filling in some of the gaps, thereby enabling his students to acquire a useful sense of context in which their reading of the play can be filled out, deepened, informed.

#### 7.4 The influence of the examination board

But there are also other, more pressing imperatives motivating Neville's intervention. The GCSE examination board provides clear and detailed guidance not only on the texts to be read but also on the coursework tasks to be completed:

Texts chosen must be of sufficient substance and quality to merit serious consideration, and tasks must conform to the specific requirements set out below. ...

The range of coursework tasks should enable candidates to show their understanding of literary tradition, and to show their appreciation of social and historical influences and cultural contexts.

(AQA 2005a: 26)

It is worth quoting in full the specific guidance offered on the 'Post-1914

Drama' coursework – the category within which *A View from the Bridge* fits:

This task should enable the candidate to demonstrate their response to the study of at least one play published after 1914. Candidates should respond to plays as drama as well as published texts.

Appropriate assignments might include the following:

- An analysis of how character, language, setting or structure contribute to the dramatic effect of a text and how these aspects relate to literary conventions or traditions, such as the device of the Common Man in *A Man For All Seasons*.
- A study of the significance of a particular scene to the play as a whole in a play such as *The Crucible* which will explore how it relates to its social and historical context.
- A study of the importance of stage directions and effects in a play such as *Equus* which will show the candidate's

awareness of dramatic conventions and the cultural context.

- An exploration of the dramatic effectiveness of one or more scenes in *The Madness of George III* which will show the candidate's awareness of the historical context and the ability to relate these scenes to the whole text.
- A study of a key scene from *An Inspector Calls* which will explore Priestley's dramatic methods and explain how an understanding of the historical and social context of the play might help shape audience response to the key scene and to the play as a whole.

(AQA 2005a: 28-9)

The examination board requires particular kinds of knowledge – knowledge of contexts both sociohistorical and literary – and particular kinds of response – response that is attentive to matters of form and structure and that is able to evaluate questions of dramatic effectiveness. It is these requirements that Neville attempts to satisfy, and he does this in a very deft and engaging way. I worry, though, about these specifications, firstly because the readers they envisage and assume are so different from the students in Neville's class – and from the vast majority of fourteen- and fifteen-year-olds. Most GCSE students are not in a position to place the text they are studying within a literary or dramatic tradition, nor necessarily to have anything other than the very sketchiest notion of the social, historical and cultural contexts of the text's production. They are, therefore, reliant on their teacher to do what Neville does here: to provide potted histories. In itself, this seems to me to be a perfectly legitimate aspect of the teacher's intervention. But what is problematic is that this potted history then becomes central to the student's 'response': the good student is the one who digests the gobbets and can regurgitate them appropriately – and we are left with something that looks uncomfortably like an English Literature curriculum for bright parrots.



We might wish to consider, then what kind of literature curriculum, what kind of engagement with texts, would be appropriate for fourteen- and fifteen-year-olds, not just in urban schools such as the one where Neville teaches.

Vygotsky argued strongly that educationalists needed to pay attention to the vital role of imagination in the intellectual development of adolescents. Those who neglected it, or who associated it merely with development in early childhood, were, he insisted, mistaken:

This false interpretation of fantasy is due to it being viewed one-sidedly, as a function which is linked to emotional life, the life of inclinations and sentiments, but its other side, which is linked to intellectual life, remains obscure. But, as Pushkin has aptly remarked, 'imagination is as necessary in geometry as it is in poetry.'

(Vygotsky 1994: 270)

One might, then, wonder if imaginative and creative engagement might find a place in the spectrum of responses to drama approved by the GCSE syllabus. The exam board's examples of 'good' assignments, however, carry the clear implication that what is being sought is a literary critical essay, dealing with aspects of context and focusing on an analysis of the playwright's technique. Candidates are invited to show that they know *how* a play is structured, *how* its effects are created, *how* it communicates to its audience. It is less clear whether there is any room in such essays for any exploration of *what* the play might mean – that is, of the meanings that are made by groups of students in their engagement with the play. This leads me on to the second, and even more worrying, implication of the specifications: what becomes marginalized or, frequently, left out altogether. Evidence for this is supplied by the GCSE examiners in a recent report:

Whilst it has to be said that many moderators are seeing responses to the same small range of texts across hundreds of centres and thousands of candidates, there is a feeling that task setting – at the heart of good approaches to coursework – is continuing to improve. The worst kinds of assignment – dubious creative responses masquerading as analysis; multiple pieces of Original Writing; descriptions of why Tom Cruise would be a better Hamlet than Brad Pitt and why he should wear black – have largely disappeared, ending up, thankfully, in the same bin as Eva Smith's Diary. Many moderators reported this year that task setting was improving as centres devise tasks which enable candidates to address key assessment objectives.

(AQA 2005b: 30)

There is a cheery circularity about the process: teachers use the assessment objectives to set tasks that enable candidates to meet the assessment criteria. Outside this virtuous circle lie the unauthorised responses at which the examiners sneer. The examiners are here rejecting not merely less successful examples of a type, but 'kinds of assignment': they have determined that responses framed within particular genres – creative responses, pieces that might encourage students to draw on wider cultural resources, more imaginative or creative explorations – are inappropriate because they do not enable candidates to meet the assessment objectives. Some years ago, in investigating school students' reading of Shakespeare, I expressed concern at the turn against empathetic writing (Yandell 1997b). Eva Smith's Diary has now officially been consigned to the dustbin of English studies, but I remain bothered by the binary opposition of creative and critical, the assumption of the automatic superiority of the essay form – and less than convinced by a simple hierarchy of values in which putatively objective analysis is privileged over forms of response that allow more scope for students to enter into a relationship with the text on their own terms.

The issue of the assessment of students' reading of literature is one to which I return in chapter 11. For now, though, I want to return to Darren and his problem with Alfieri. Neville, using the contrasting front covers to explicate the title (and hence the mediating role of Alfieri), asks, 'Which side are we on? Which side are the characters living on?' There is an assumption underlying these questions that we are on a different side from the characters, that we, in effect, share Alfieri's detached perspective. And this is, I think, the assumption that Darren challenges. He knows whose side he is on, in the sense both of where his allegiances lie and also of whose lifeworld more closely resembles his own. For Miller, presenting working class characters to a middle-class, theatre-going audience, Alfieri's choric role serves the purpose of mediating an unfamiliar social world and representing the story within the frame of a classical Western dramatic tradition (hence, for example, Miller's original title for the play, *An Italian Tragedy*). For Darren, Alfieri is the intrusive other: no wonder that what he says 'makes no sense.' This does not mean that questions of dramatic structure and technique are irrelevant to Darren's reading of the play – any more than they were irrelevant to students who once grappled with writing Eva Smith's diary.

Miller's observations on the casting for the first English production of the play are worth remembering in this context:

The *View* auditions were held in a theatre whose back faced the vegetable stalls of Covent Garden. I would sit beside Peter Brook listening in some pain as one actor after another who seemed to have arrived fresh from Oxford recited the words of Brooklyn waterfront Italo-Americans. One day in desperation I asked Peter if we couldn't interview some of the

Cockney hawkers in the hive of working-class types behind the theatre, exactly the kind of men the play needed. 'Doesn't a grocer's son ever think of becoming an actor?' I asked. 'Those are all grocer's sons,' Peter replied, indicating the group of young gentlemen awaiting their turns at one side of the orchestra, 'but they have trained themselves into this class language. Almost all the plays are written in that language and are about those kinds of people.'

(Miller 1987/1990: 430)

Darren does not need to turn himself into a Brooklyn waterfront Italo-American to recognise his (class) affinity with Eddie and Marco, say – an affinity that is, of course, also gendered. Perhaps he needs the chance to explore, play with – and enjoy – this affinity before he can even begin to engage with questions of technique, of structure, of theatrical tradition. And when he does begin to engage with the play in this way, it still might be on his terms, from his reading position.

## Chapter 8

### **Embodied readings: exploring the multimodal social semiotic resources of the English classroom**

What would an adequate account of English lessons look like and how can we begin to make sense of what is accomplished in urban English classrooms? One set of answers to these questions is provided by recent government policy. In this official version, what English is, how it is experienced, is specified centrally; teaching and learning are objectives-led, skills-based and subject to accountability measures through the imposition of high-stakes standardised tests; the content of English is a thin gruel of context-independent literacy activities (DfEE 2001b; Street *et al.* 2007).

In this chapter, I want to continue to sketch out a different set of answers – answers that are instantiated in specific classroom practice.<sup>1</sup> In paying close attention to this practice, I want to suggest that the richness of the cultural work that takes place in the classroom demands a theoretical synthesis of, as it were, old and new semiotics: to make sense of these English classrooms, to describe and theorise the reading that is accomplished in them, we need to use both the multimodal lens of recent social semiotics and Bakhtinian perspectives on language and culture.

The multimodal turn in social semiotic theory has, to a large extent, been promoted as a necessary response to new times, new technologies. The prominence of the screen rather than the page as a site of semiotic activity,

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this chapter appeared as Yandell (2008c).

the salience of the image, still and moving, across a broad spectrum of media, and the concomitant marginalisation of written (printed) text are taken as facts of cultural life in the twenty-first century. Hence, it is argued, there is a need for a multimodal lens through which the new signifying practices, new combinations and ensembles of semiotic material, can be investigated and analysed (Hodge and Kress 1988; Kress and van Leeuwen 1996 and 2001; Kress 2003).

But at the same time as multimodality is presented as a necessary response to a changed semiotic landscape, it has also been argued that multimodal activity is nothing new (Kress 2001; Kress *et al.* 2001; Franks, 2003; Jewitt and Kress 2003; Coupland and Gwyn 2003). From this perspective, multimodal theory reveals truths at least as old as Cicero, to whom it was perfectly clear that rhetoric was not just a matter of what was said but of how it was said, and of the mutually complementary systems of word and gesture (Kendon 2000). In this version of multimodality, to treat language, either spoken or written, as a monomodal system was always to deal in abstractions: monomodal assumptions thus amounted to a failure to recognise the materiality of the book or the *billet-doux*, to ignore the simple fact that words are spoken (and heard) by physical bodies situated in specific (and semiotically significant) spaces. It is this second, older version of multimodality which will inform much of what follows.

There is, of course, no fundamental contradiction between these two sides of multimodality; indeed, it is reasonable to suggest that it is precisely the affordances of the new media that have alerted us to aspects of social

semiosis that previously it had been easier to ignore. This last point has a general application in relation to the sociocultural world; it also has a particular relevance to questions of research method within the social sciences. The new technologies that have made multimodality an unmissable feature of contemporary life have also made it possible for the researcher to pay proper attention to the multimodal meanings that have always been in front of our noses. Where once we had to rely on audio tape recordings of significant interactions (and hence transcripts that perforce privileged the spoken word), now the availability of digital video enables us to record and analyse a much wider ensemble of semiotic resources as they are deployed – and remade (LeBaron and Streeck 2000; Franks and Jewitt 2001; Goodwin 2001).

In what follows, I want to suggest that an adequate account of reading, of pedagogy and of learning within secondary English classrooms needs to pay attention to the multimodal work that goes on in them. This chapter is also, therefore, a return to the methodological argument I developed in chapter 4 (4.5.2) in response to Doecke *et al.* (2007). I want to focus attention on two lessons, one taught by Neville and the other by Monica. In the following presentation and analysis of data from two of these lessons, I make use of some of the still images, taken from the video footage and supplemented by description, to capture something of the complexity of the video data.

### 8.1 Year 10 explore Arthur Miller

In the first of these lessons, from January 2006, Neville's Year 10 class is exploring Arthur Miller's *A View from the Bridge* (the lesson took place nearly two months before the one that was the focus in the previous chapter). I have indicated that the main emphasis of my investigation will be on what I have characterised as the older multimodality of embodied social semiotic activity. At the start of the lesson, however, there is a sequence that is only rendered possible because of the multimodal affordances of the new information and communications technologies. As the students enter the classroom, they notice – and pay attention to – the image displayed on the interactive whiteboard. It is an aerial view of the school and the surrounding area, downloaded from the Google website. Its presence on the IWB, and the students' reading of it, produced an opening to the lesson that differed noticeably from what I had observed on other occasions in this class's English lessons.

In the normal course of events, the students do not enter the classroom *en masse*; they trickle in, individually or in small groups. Partly this is because they come from different lessons, and hence from different parts of the school building; partly it is because, at the times when one lesson ends and another begins, the corridors and stairways function as a social space, where students meet and interact. For this Year 10 class, the social spaces and interactions of the corridor tend to permeate the classroom. Conversations begun outside the classroom continue within it, and there is a fairly leisurely attitude taken towards whatever it is that the teacher has decided should be



the business of the English lesson. It takes time for seating arrangements to be sorted out, time for coats and the other 'non-uniform' items, which the school rules decree should not be worn in class, to be removed. And, of course, the teacher's relationship with the class is implicated in all of this. His arrangement of the furniture – café style, as it is sometimes termed – with clusters of tables around which students sit, together with his markedly respectful, quiet and polite way of addressing the students, lies at a particular point on the spectrum of possible approaches towards classroom management and organisation. The students, meanwhile, can be seen as contesting the official script, the power relations of the institution, in a myriad of tiny actions – the length of time taken to remove a jacket, to end a conversation, to sit in an assigned seat – each of which seems to signal a desire to hang on to other identities, other ways of being, and a reluctance to accept the particular *habitus* of school student that the institution seeks to impose on them.

In today's lesson, as usual, students' arrivals in the classroom are dispersed across a two-minute period. What is unusual is that their attention is more or less immediately caught by the image on the screen. This difference is manifested in speech, in that the first conversations in the room are about something that is present – the image on the screen:

[00:24]

**Rebecca:** That's the football pitch

**Jamal** (sitting down by window): What's that from?

(24 January 2006)

Much more obvious, though, is the difference in the orientation of students' posture and gaze. Ten seconds into the lesson, Rebecca is standing in front

of the IWB, looking at it; Sean enters; Imran is sitting, also looking at the IWB. Sean walks across the room towards his seat; he turns towards the board as he does so – following Rebecca's gaze; Halima enters and also looks at the IWB. Rebecca approaches the board; Halima and Sean are all standing directly in front of the board, as Rebecca points at a spot on it (it is at this moment, 25 seconds into the lesson, that she makes the utterance transcribed above). Tariq approaches the board, stands to Rebecca's left.

Forty seconds later, more students have entered the room. Almost all are congregated around the board; those who are further away are also looking at it (Figure 8.1).

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**Figure 8.1**

01:42, 24 January 2006

Contrast this moment with a frame, two minutes into the lesson, from the video footage of the class's English lesson two weeks later (Figure 8.2):

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**Figure 8.2**  
02:03, 6 February 2006

Single frames cannot capture very much of the difference which I am seeking to describe. What is salient, I think, in this juxtaposition is the question of gaze. In the first frame, there is a single focus for the students' gaze – and it is clear from this where the students' interest lies; in the second frame, the dispersed gazes of the students reveals the extent to which there is not, at this moment, a common, unified interest in what is going on in the lesson. The second frame, I want to suggest, is much more representative of the early parts of the class's English lessons.

As one can see from the second frame (Figure 8.2), the IWB was also switched on in the later lesson, but it clearly did not function as a pole of attraction in the way that it had in the lesson under consideration. Why was this? The answer, so obvious that it might appear banal, is that the aerial view of the school meant something to the students. The IWB acted as a node, as it were, a meeting point of local, everyday knowledge and school knowledge (Vygotsky 1987; see chapter 2, above). Questions of representation and provenance, inevitably and inextricably the business of English lessons, were here located in the students' sense of their immediate

environment – and hence both Rebecca’s identification of *the* football pitch and Jamal’s question about where the image came from, how it arrived on the screen in the classroom.

The image was not part of the planned lesson. As Neville, the teacher, says:

[02:08]

**Teacher:** OK, I had absolutely no intention of having this map up at the beginning of the lesson, I had it up at the end of the last lesson, but it’s made me think....

(24 January 2006)

And, as he speaks, he zooms out from the view of the school to an image of most of the northern hemisphere:

[03:02]

**Teacher:** OK, when we did the lesson on Alfieri’s speech and I was showing you those maps, I didn’t know about this bit of Google, which I just might use instead ...we talked about how Alfieri said he lived in New York, how he came from Sicily, he was born in Italy, he said, and he lived in New York, and this wasn’t Sicily he said, this was Brooklyn, this was Red Hook....OK we’ve just about in this picture we got Sicily there [he points at the board]

(24 January 2006)

What the teacher is doing is exploiting the interest that the students have shown in the image to enable the students to make connections, connections between this lesson and earlier lessons as well as connections between local/unschooled knowledge and more disciplinary knowledges, between geography and the literary text that the class is studying:

[04:58]

**Teacher:** and that there is Manhattan, the posh expensive bit, the island where the Empire State Building and the World Trade Centre were....and Brooklyn ....Manhattan’s up there, and this is Brooklyn, have a look at it, what can you see?

?**Martin:** buildings

Teacher: buildings, anything else?

?**Amina:** water, river?

Teacher: OK where’s the water?

?**Rebecca:** forest

**Teacher:** there's lots of trees....but look at the buildings, how they are laid out....in rows, and rows and rows, so this, I'd say, I'm pretty sure, that's the Brooklyn Bridge – that's the bridge in *A view from the bridge*....and this would be the waterfront, those would be the docks that Eddie works in, the shorefront except of course that this was, this is probably a couple of years ago, as opposed to 1955, OK, something to bear in mind.

(24 January 2006)

The whole episode takes only seven minutes. It is, I think, an adroit pedagogical move, using the affordances of the technology (the interactive whiteboard linked to the resources of the internet) to provide students with a bridge between their own sense of place and the places of the play – from the contemporary dockland of East London to an historical New York waterfront. Simultaneously, the technology is used as a bridge between the possibility of representing their local area through aerial images and the representation of 1950s Brooklyn in Miller's play.

I want to explore this last point in a little more detail. There is, it is true, little in the spoken interaction in this section of the lesson that directs explicit attention towards questions of representation or perspective. What I would like to suggest, though, is that the activity itself foregrounds these questions. Much of what is achieved here could have been presented by other means. Neville could have arrived at the lesson equipped with a globe, an atlas and a collection of photographic images of mid-twentieth-century New York (though such resources could not have been easily assembled in the impromptu manner that defines Neville's response to students' interest here). Had he done so, it would have been highly unlikely that anyone would have asked the question that Jamal poses right at the start: 'What's that from?' By

interrogating the provenance of resources, the question opens up questions of agency: who has assembled these resources, for what purposes?

Moments later, as Neville, responding to students' interest in the IWB image by improvising a geography lesson, begins to change the image from the close-up aerial view of the school, one of the students asks 'What's the point of zooming out?' The question does much more than reveal a shared technical language and a shared expertise in manipulating images and perspectives: it focuses attention on the activity, and hence on the agency of the viewer. And these questions – from whose point of view are these objects being seen, and for what purposes? – are, as has been indicated in chapter 7 (above), pertinent questions to ask in relation to *A View from the Bridge*. The fact that these questions are asked is itself evidence of what this episode makes possible. What I am also suggesting here is that students can ask these questions because of the way that the teacher uses the affordances of the technology to render visible the viewer's agency in selecting and framing particular views and particular subjects. There is a relationship, therefore, a complex and productive interaction between the different social semiotic modes in play in the classroom, between the teacher's and students' language-as-speech, their use of gaze and posture to signal engagement, the images on the IWB and the printed text of the play.

The interactivity here, then, is what Moss *et al.* have termed 'Conceptual interactivity – where the focus is on interacting with, exploring and constructing curriculum concepts and ideas' (Moss *et al.* 2007: 40). In reporting on one of their case study examples, taken from a Maths lesson, Moss *et al.* argue that:

What is important for learning is how the design of the text reshapes curriculum knowledge. What is to be learnt and how it can be learnt become clearer. The images....and the opportunity to manipulate these images dynamically offer the students a different representation that is central to the learning task. This representation offers the possibility of making connections between the specialized knowledge of Maths and the everyday knowledge of space and design. It also enables them to draw on other knowledge and experiences and to connect them with mathematics, which in turn repositions them in relation to the production of knowledge (Moss *et al.* 2007: 42).

In the next part of the lesson, attention shifts away from the interactive whiteboard and onto the printed text. Yet, even here – especially here – we need a multimodal lens if we are to investigate how Neville and his students explore *A View from the Bridge* in the following 20-minute segment of the lesson. Neville explains that the activity is a continuation of work started in the previous lesson:

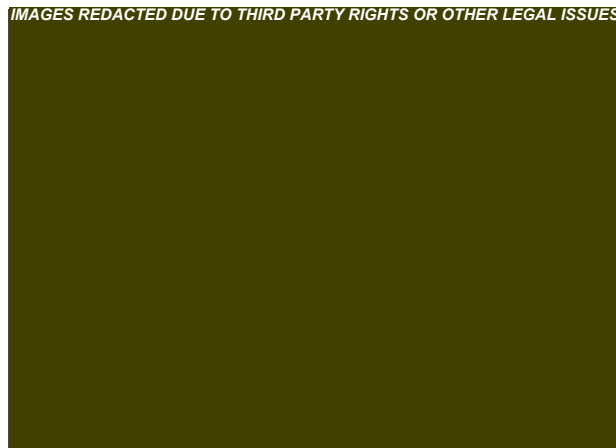
[07:46]

**Teacher:** I'm going to take the register, and instead of replying here or yes or nothing, I want you to um tell me the name of either Eddie, Beatrice or Catherine, one thing they did with their hands, and either what it says about them or one reason that you think Arthur Miller has included this, OK, so either Eddie, Beatrice or Catherine, one thing they do with their hands, in those first ten pages we've read, and one reason why the playwright might have told the actor to do this.

(24 January 2006)

In issuing these instructions, the dominant mode employed by the teacher is language-as-speech: he tells the students what they are to do, how they are to respond to their names. The message – a message about the task but also about power relations in the classroom – is, however, echoed in other modes. Neville has taken a position at the front centre of the room, in front of

the IWB. He sits on the teacher's desk, facing the class. While he talks, he uses his fingers to enumerate the three parts of the task (Figure 8.3).



**Figure 8.3**  
08:35, 24 January 2006

All of these other modes – positioning, posture, gaze and gesture – have clear regulatory functions: they are part of the ensemble of multimodal resources whereby the teacher organises and manages the work of the class. I want to focus attention on one of these modes, gesture, because what Neville accomplishes through gesture is much more than the maintenance of power relationships in the classroom. In this instance, too, gesture has a special place because it is directly implicated in the content of the lesson: gesture functions, then, as a managerial and a heuristic tool as well as being an object of study.

Something of the power of gesture can be glimpsed at an earlier moment in the lesson.



Time	Teacher movement/gesture	Student movement/gesture	Speech
04:17	gestures towards the door; stands by Salman, gesturing towards the door with his thumb	another student arrives in the doorway, says something	<i>Salman</i> : Shut up you fat cunt <i>Teacher</i> : Salman, get out
	places both hands over his eyes	Salman, still sitting, turns towards teacher	<i>Salman</i> : What, no, I'm sorry, I'm sorry
	Teacher closes the door after Salman, returns towards the board	Salman gets up and leaves the room, apologises as he does so	<i>Salman</i> : Sorry

(24 January 2006)

While ascribing causality to any one 'turn' within such an interaction is fraught with difficulty, it seems that the moment when Neville convinces Salman that he does indeed have to leave the room is not when he issues the injunction to leave, nor even when he gestures towards the door with his thumb, but when he makes the much more theatrical gesture of covering his face with his hands. This movement breaks the eye contact between student and teacher; it signals disengagement but also, possibly, despair. It achieves meanings that words could not: words would prolong the conversation, keeping the possibility of dialogue – and hence, as it were, of plea-bargaining – alive. Neville's gesture tells Salman that the time has come to beat a tactical retreat, and he does so. (There is something slightly exaggerated, pantomimic about the whole interaction – as, indeed, there is about Salman's return to the class, a couple of minutes later, when he tiptoes in while Neville's back is turned.)

When Neville invites students to give examples of what the three main characters do with their hands, the first few contributions are made and received largely through the mode of language-as-speech. Other modes are

at play, but operate entirely in a regulatory function as means whereby the teacher organises the discourse. He directs his gaze towards the student whom he has invited to speak; he stands at the front of the room, register cradled in his left elbow, pen in his right hand, and appears to tick off students as each offers their example of a gesture. What is being emphasised here is not simply a power relationship but a concern to establish an inclusive practice: Neville uses the register as a sign that this is an activity in which all can participate, and in which all are expected to participate.

Something else happens when Rumina refers to the moment in the play when Catherine leads Eddie to the armchair. Neville raises his right arm, extends it horizontally to his side, and looks along it, to a point beyond his hand: he performs, in other words, the gesture that Rumina has chosen as her example (Figure 8.4).

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**Figure 8.4**

15:06, 24 January 2006

Here, then, gesture has moved from a regulatory to a heuristic function: this is, Neville indicates, what the stage direction means, this is what the moment in the play might look like.

A little later in the lesson, Neville draws the students' attention to Eddie's words to Catherine: 'Turn around, lemme see in the back.' The teacher's interest here is primarily linguistic – he wants students to be able to identify, and talk about, the grammatical and lexical means whereby Eddie's character is established. But Neville notices, and capitalises on, the fact that Amina explicates Eddie's speech gesturally:

[19:43]

**Teacher:** OK, good, Amina, do what you did – I just saw you move your arm, didn't you?

(24 January 2006)

And Neville repeats Amina's gesture, lifting his right arm and making a circling motion with his hand.



**Figure 8.5**

19:46, 24 January 2006

Such sequences are significant. They suggest the beginnings of a move towards a reconceptualisation of the written text as a performance text – just as the focus throughout this part of the lesson on the stage directions and hand movements of the characters emphasises the extent to which the play's

meanings are made multimodally. And yet Amina's single gesture, her interpretation of the hand movement that might accompany Eddie's words to Catherine, is, I think, the only moment in the lesson when a student makes such a move: it is the only time when a student makes, as it were, an embodied contribution to the learning.

Why this might be the case is suggested at another moment in this part of the lesson, when Neville steps back from the activity itself, from the identification and explication of gesture within the playscript, to provide students with a rationale for the activity:

[15:52]

**Teacher:** Lots of people yesterday, about three different people...were asking what's the point of this? I don't get it, what's the point of this? Um, the examining board give us a few objectives, and this is actually, this is what I'm supposed to be teaching you, not necessarily in *A view from the bridge*, but as part of the course, it's one of the GCSE objectives, I've made it a bit shorter.

[reading from a slide he has put up on the IWB] *Understand how writers use devices to achieve their effects and comment on ways language changes* – it's my job to teach you how to do that, according to the exam board.

(24 January 2006)

The activity, then, is located in the learning objectives prescribed by the GCSE examination board (and, though Neville does not say this, derived by the board from the National Curriculum). The way in which the teacher frames the activity helps to explain why, in exploring the meaning of gesture in the play, linguistic modes (language-as-speech, language-as-writing) have tended to remain dominant. The focus of the students' attention is on the play as a written text, the work of Arthur Miller, and not, primarily, the play as

a performance text, the collaborative work of an acting company. Again, this is something that Neville is quite explicit about:

[22:52]

**Teacher:** ...we're not watching it, so we don't see the actors doing this, we're reading it and thinking about it as something that Arthur Miller has written [Neville returns to the IWB, making a circling motion with his hand around the words that refer to the writer's use of devices], in which these stage directions are the devices, OK, the devices he uses to have an effect, because we're reading it, because we're not watching it....

(24 January 2006)

In itself, this is a remarkable instance of accountability, of a teacher offering to the class an account of the processes in which he and the students are involved. It is an account that points in two directions, both towards the requirements of the examination syllabus and towards the material conditions in which the reading of the text is being produced. What this move accomplishes is the creation of a space in which the complexity, the Bakhtinian multi-voicedness of this reading (Bakhtin 1981, and chapter 2, above) can be explored and reflected upon.

Having spent time focusing on Eddie's 'Turn around, lemme look in the back' as a way of eliciting the linguistic particularity of the character, the voice that the actor playing Eddie must inhabit, Neville directs the students' attention to the stage directions:

[23:13]

**Teacher:** ... so as we read it, as Rebecca has been reading out all the stage directions, Rebecca – you're not reading it in Eddie's voice are you?

**Rebecca:** [???

**Teacher:** are you reading it in B's?  
??

**Teacher:** so whose voice are you reading the stage directions in?

**Rebecca:** my voice

**Teacher:** yours, excellent, OK so one voice could be the reader's. Who's talking to us as Rebecca is reading this, who's putting these words into her mouth?

**Tariq:** the er, the writer

**Teacher:** good, so another voice could be the writer's, all words, I think, are in someone's voice....or in several voices, and as we've said, this is in Rebecca's voice, it's in Arthur Miller's voice, we're hearing them all at the same time – this one [pointing to Eddie's words on the IWB] is in Tariq's voice, it's in Eddie's voice, and also it's the writer's voice

**Amina:** Tariq?

**Teacher:** because he's been reading the part of Eddie, just like Rebecca has been the stage directions [pause] and as well as all that, it's in the voice that we imagine Tariq may be trying to achieve, sometimes when he reads it you may feel oh I don't think Eddie would say it like that, so we've got, um, the reader, the character, the writer, the actor, the audience and probably loads of others, OK?

(24 January 2006)

The development here is from Rebecca's straightforward, commonsense response (she reads the stage directions, so obviously they are in her voice), through the idea of the ventriloquism that is inherent in scripted drama (actors speaking someone else's words, the words put in their mouths, authorised, by the writer), to a much more subtle model of polyphony, of the simultaneous presence and apprehension of multiple voices inhabiting the text.

This model situates the students differently from the position allocated to them in Neville's earlier version of the author-text-reader relationship, where 'we're reading it and thinking about it as something that Arthur Miller has written, in which these stage directions are the devices...he uses to have an effect.' In the earlier version, authority rests with the writer. In this model, on the other hand, the interpretive space offered to both reader and audience is

not merely the opportunity to construe the intentions of the playwright, but rather to compare actual readings with a range of other possible readings, readings that are products of the readers' own interpretive decisions. Within this heteroglossia, Neville's earlier distinction between reading and performance also becomes less clear-cut. The students to whom parts have been assigned are represented as actors, the rest of the class as audience.

And yet, of course, the modes of performance are constrained: for all the attention paid to stage directions and to gesture, the students only get to do (and hear) the voices. There are many reasons why this is so – to do with examination syllabuses and assessment criteria, the social dynamic of the class and the fact that Neville, in his first year as a teacher, is still establishing a relationship with the class and developing a sense of what might be possible within the parameters of secondary English as it is instantiated in his classroom.

## 8.2 Year 9 explore *Richard III*

I want now to turn to a different lesson, one in which students draw on a different range of multimodal social semiotic resources in making sense of a complex text. I will focus on fourteen minutes of a Year 9 English lesson from November, 2005. The class had recently started work on *Richard III*. They had read the first part of Act 1, and had watched the openings of two film versions, starring Laurence Olivier and Ian McKellen respectively in the title role. In the first part of this lesson, students were analysing still images taken from the two films, discussing the ways in which Richard was represented in

each. This is how Monica, the teacher, sets up the final activity of the lesson, an activity that is intended to prepare students for reading the next part of the play, the scene in which Richard woos Anne:

[36:19]

**Teacher:** OK, we can do this quite quickly, all right, and you can be in a three and you can be in a three, what I want you to do, just very quickly, I want you to do a very quick role-play

**Billy:** Yes!

**Teacher:** I want one person, listen, one person has to persuade the other person to do something that they really, really, really, really don't want to do, OK, so I want you think about, you can be anything, anything at all, not want to do whatever it is you decide and I don't want it to end up with punching somebody and forcing them to do something

[Nazrul throws punch and makes appropriate sound effect]  
you have to do it with words, OK,

**Student:** can I be anything?

**Teacher:** you can be girls, boys....

**Kirsty:** [holding up image that they have been analysing]  
have you got to base it on the picture?

**Teacher:** no, it's not based on the picture, it's not based on anything, you can pick any situation with any characters you like but one person has to be persuading another person or other people to do something that they do not want to do

**Kirsty:** has it got to be Richard and them lot?

**Teacher:** no, it can be anybody, anybody you like

(22 November 2005)

Billy's positive response to the news that the class is to work on role-play is representative of the class's attitude to such activities: students are both used to, and enthusiastic about, such activities. It is interesting, too, that there is an assumption on the part of at least some of the students that the improvisations that they devise should be obviously related to the work they have been doing on *Richard III*: Monica has to repeat, four times, that students are free to choose any role at all – that they do not have to base their work on the characters or the events of the play. The activity is thus different from the role-play I have described from an observation of the



class's exploration of *Julius Caesar* some six months earlier (chapter 5, above). In that earlier lesson, students took on the roles of characters from the play, at specific moments in the play. Their improvisations there were thus more constrained, explorations of the interactions of given characters at defined moments leading up to the assassination of Caesar.

In another respect, it might seem that the teacher is being highly prescriptive. Her injunction that the students have to achieve the persuasion 'with words' might appear to indicate that the only mode available is language-as-speech. While there is an emphasis here on the persuasive power of language, the main force of this warning is clear from the context – 'I don't want it to end up with punching somebody and forcing them to do something.' In any case, what happens next is anything but monomodal.

In the preceding forty-five minutes of the lesson, the organisation of the classroom had conformed to a paradigm that is instantly recognisable from the vast majority of secondary school lessons, not only within English but across a broad swathe of the curriculum. With very few exceptions, students remained seated throughout. Their attention was focused, to a greater or lesser extent, on the teacher at the front of the room, introducing the lesson and explaining the activities, on the materials on the tables in front of them, and on their partners (while working on the analysis of the images taken from the productions of *Richard III*). Their contribution to the lesson had been almost entirely through the modes of language-as-writing, in annotating the images, and language-as-speech, in discussing the images with their partners and with the rest of the class. Legitimate activity – work – might

reasonably have been construed as participation in these modes. Other semiotic resources are deployed by the students, but only in ways that are strictly ancillary: hands are raised to indicate that the student has something to say; aspects of the images are identified by pointing gestures; participation in pair work or in whole-class talk is signalled by the direction of gaze and by changes in the orientation of the body. A sense of this can be gleaned from a view of part of the classroom immediately after the teacher has set up the role-play activity (Figure 8.6):



**Figure 8.6**  
37:30, 22 November 2005

Where the groups – such as those in the middle of the picture – have already been constituted, the students have tended to turn towards each other, thereby both signalling the identity of the group and enabling planning talk to happen within the group. In contrast, the students furthest from the camera have not yet established their group: negotiations are being conducted across the tables, as is evident from the direction of gaze.

These, though, are merely slight variations. Within two minutes, the classroom as a site of social semiotic activity has been utterly transformed (Figure 8.7):

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**Figure 8.7**  
39:17, 22 November 2005

All the students are now on their feet. This has not happened all at once. Some students had moved around the room as they formed their groups. Then, at different moments during the two minutes, groups of students moved from their seats to spaces in between the tables as they began to develop their role-plays. No one has told them to stand, to move – but they know that this is both allowed and also, in some sense, expected of them. (The activity has a history: it is part of a pattern of such activities, part of the class's experience of English with Monica as their teacher: see chapter 5, above.) The expectation can be inferred from the decision that the teacher makes about where to intervene: the groups where she lingers, where she chooses to interact with the students, are those who have remained seated when others have begun to move around. It would seem that standing up indicates a specific stage in the activity, reached when the group has decided on the scenario and on the allocation of roles.

For five minutes more, the rehearsals continue. The classroom is noisy, bustling, seemingly chaotic. Then, with the minimum of fuss, Monica brings the class back together again so that the performances can begin:

[46:16]

**Teacher:** if we're quick on the swapping over, we can get them all in, come on, and we'll talk about them tomorrow in the lesson, right, ready, go...

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**Figure 8.8**

46:26, 22 November 2005

And the first role-play starts. A performance space has been created along one side of the classroom. In the first scenario, three female friends meet. Lucy and Helen know that Jo's boyfriend (whose name is Richard) has been unfaithful to her, and they want to persuade her to end the relationship:

[46:34]

**Lucy:** tell her about Richard

**Helen:** he was cheating on you

**Jo:** you just want me to break up with him

**Lucy:** he was in the cinema, with some other girl

**Jo:** I don't care, I've heard it all so many times, I don't care....he's rich

**Lucy:** just because he's rich, it doesn't mean you have to be his bitch, man, you're such a gold digger

(22 November 2005)

The scenario and the roles that the girls adopt are familiar from the stock situations and characters of soap opera. Their dialogue achieves all of this with great economy, establishing Helen and Lucy as the loyal friends, Jo as the conflicted lover. To acknowledge this, though, is merely to recognise that

the students are able to draw on a stock of shared cultural knowledge. The activity provides an opportunity for the girls to explore relationships and the difficult ethical questions that arise from them. What are the obligations of friendship? How can competing claims – of loyalty, of economic wellbeing, of romantic ideals – be reconciled?

But the social semiotic work that the group does is not reducible to the dialogue that they have improvised. As Anton Franks has argued: 'In improvised drama, the body acts as a form of representation and allows the possibility of transforming everyday spaces (everyday classrooms, for instance) into theatrical spaces' (Franks 1996: 107).

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**Figure 8.9**  
46:49, 22 November 2005

They use the physical resources of their bodies and of the performance space to make meanings. The solidarity and intimacy of the three friends is represented by their physical closeness, Lucy's power by her central position within the group as well as by her insistent eye-contact with Jo, whose reluctance to accept her friends' counsel is communicated as much by gaze and body language, her tendency to avoid eye-contact and to turn slightly

away from the other two, as it is by the words she speaks. When Lucy says, 'Just because he's rich, it doesn't mean you have to be his bitch,' the epigrammatic force of her words is emphasised by a dismissive flick of her left hand (Figure 8.9). The implication of the gesture is that the choice that confronts Jo is not simply over whether to continue the relationship with Richard, since what she decides about Richard will affect how she is seen by her friends, and therefore how they will relate to her in the future: Lucy's gesture, therefore, can be construed as a warning, or even a threat. It has been enough to persuade Jo, who moves away from the group, meets Richard and informs him that it is all over between them.

In the following improvisation, the performance space becomes a shopping centre, where Ali is walking with his father. They pass a window where a new video game is displayed, and Ali attempts to convince his father that he should buy the game for him. If in some ways this scenario seems to draw more on the out-of-school lives and interests of the students, the style in which the scene is acted suggests something rather less mundane.

Alongside the words with which he promises, in effect, to become the perfect son, Ali produces the most supplicatory of facial expressions, his eyes beseechingly wide; and, when these do not achieve the desired outcome, he prostrates himself, kneeling before his father. There is an arch knowingness about Ali's heightened use of facial expression and body language that might, perhaps, owe more to Bollywood than to first-hand experience.

In the third group's improvisation, three chairs are rearranged to form the interior of a car. Kemi, driving, informs Kirsty, her front-seat passenger, that there is a job for her:

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**Figure 8.10**  
49:41, 22 November 2005

[49:41]

**Kemi:** Kirsty, the boss has called you in for some special business, there's a man you have to cap...to join the crew....you need the money for your mother's breast cancer, so I don't wanna hear....your cousin could just disappear, you know, Kirsty, that would be so unfortunate, don't you think....now, Kirsty, here's the gun, and they're coming now, I better not hear you flop, the boss won't be happy

(22 November 2005)

There is much to admire about the performance. Kemi's speech shows that she knows a thing or two about the language of persuasion: there is the lexis of the criminal underworld, as represented in a wealth of texts from *The Big Sleep* to *The Bill* ('the boss....special business....to cap'); there is an appeal to an economic motive that operates simultaneously as an assumption that family loyalties trump any adherence to wider social or ethical concerns ('you need the money for your mother's breast cancer'); and there is the deliciously minatory use of polite understatement ('that would be so unfortunate, don't

you think'). Equally impressive, though, is the way that the group has marshalled its resources to produce an improvisation within which Kemi can create so menacing a character. The hand movements that represent her manipulation of the steering wheel function as a reminder of the claustrophobic car interior that is the setting, while simultaneously emphasising her character's dominance and control. Clothes, meanwhile, become signifiers of gang membership: Jenny, silent and impassive on the back seat, wears a hood, Kemi is muffled in scarf and woolly hat – while only Kirsty, the novice, is bareheaded. In rehearsal earlier, Kirsty had also worn a scarf as a makeshift hood: the decision to discard this for the performance itself is one that emphasises her character's precarious status on the periphery of the gang. In the exuberant profusion of reasons offered in Kemi's speech, Kirsty's lack of headgear reinforces the importance of one motive in particular: 'to join the crew'. (Amongst other effects, then, what the role-play activity does is to create the possibility that students' non-uniform items, which generally, as I indicated above, intrude on the lesson only as part of the students' counterscript, their contestation of the identity imposed on them by the disciplinary regime of the school as institution, become resources for cultural making – and hence for learning within the official script of the lesson.)

### 8.3 The body as dialogic classroom resource

Neville, in the lesson on *A View from the Bridge* which I discuss above, makes explicit to the class the connection between, on the one hand, the focus on gesture and the stage directions through which Miller specifies



gesture, and, on the other, the overarching framework of the GCSE syllabus and its assessment objectives. There are, as I have suggested, other things going on in the lesson, other ways of thinking about the script and its realisation in the particular conditions of performance that pertain to the classroom. Nonetheless, the teacher is at pains to ensure that students understand that the stage directions that they read in their copies of the play are 'devices' whereby the writer achieves identifiable 'effects.' He is thus teaching in the manner promoted by current government policy (the *Framework for English's* encouragement of 'teaching to objectives that are shared with pupils' [DfEE 2001b: 18]).

In Monica's lesson, in contrast, the students' work on role-play is not informed by any explicit learning objective. What, then, is the relationship between these performances and what might be construed as the teacher's objective? In relation to the learning that the teacher plans, the connection has to be inferred from two sources. Firstly, there is Monica's instruction when she sets up the activity: 'One person has to persuade the other person to do something that they really, really, really, really don't want to do.' Secondly, there is the place that the lesson occupies in the reading of *Richard III*: the class is about to read Act 1, scene 2, in which Richard woos Anne. He does this over the corpse of Henry VI, who is, in Shakespeare's version of history, her father-in-law.<sup>2</sup> It would have been perfectly possible for Monica to have

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<sup>2</sup> She was betrothed to Edward, Henry VI's son, at the time of his death at the battle of Tewkesbury (1471). And not, as the Standards website informs us, 'his dead brother's widow' (Lesson 2 PowerPoint, slide 9, downloaded from 'Teaching Shakespeare to able pupils: Lessons to provide challenge for pupils working towards Level 7 in reading Shakespeare')

said to the class something along the lines of: 'We are about to read a scene in the play in which Richard manages to persuade somebody who hates him, someone whose husband and father-in-law he has killed, to marry him. I want you to explore how he might manage to do this, so I would like you to try improvising such a scene.' She does not do so; more than this, as I noted above, she emphasises to the students that there is no necessary connection in character or situation between the improvisations and the play.

What happens in the lesson is that the students produce a wide variety of situations and characters. Apart from the three I have already described, there is a scene in a nightclub, where a reluctant dancer succumbs to peer pressure and takes to the floor; a conversation where someone is cajoled into taking drugs for the first time; and another where a young man agrees to participate in a violent attack on an elderly neighbour. I want to say something, later, about the creativity of these performances. Even within the narrower context of the class's developing understanding of *Richard III*, however, this fourteen-minute section at the end of a lesson seems to me to have been remarkably effective as a means of preparing students to grasp the astonishing seduction scene in the play. It would be tempting to conclude that the students' performances show how much they already knew about persuasion, about the multimodal semiotic terrain wherein relationships are instantiated and whereby power is established and contested. But it might be more accurate to suggest that the performances enabled students to learn

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<[http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/secondary/keystage3/subjects/english/shakespeare/teaching\\_learning/able\\_pupils/](http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/secondary/keystage3/subjects/english/shakespeare/teaching_learning/able_pupils/)>, accessed 12 April 2007).

(more) about these things: in the performances, concepts are being developed.

Eight months later, when I was feeding back some of the preliminary results of my research to the class, I explained that I had already shown some of the footage of their role-plays to different groups of teachers. I said that there had been some discussion among the teachers as to whether the activity could be construed as a legitimate part of English lessons. The students assured me that it could. Kirsty commented:

role-play lets you like express yourself more in words that you can't say, like, you can act, you can act something out that you don't know how to say, it helps you more to explain.  
(7 July 2006)

Foyzur added:

it's like you're saying something through your actions and you can hear them and....see what's going on instead of just reading so you understand in a different way.  
(7 July 2006)

Terry Eagleton has made an argument for the importance of embodied experience that intersects interestingly with the students' justification for role-play:

The body is the most palpable sign that we have of the givenness of human existence. It is not something we get to choose. My body is not something I decided to walk around in, like a toupee. It is not something I am 'in' at all. Having a body is not like being inside a tank. Who would be this disembodied 'I' inside it? It is more like having a language. Having a language, as we have seen, is not like being trapped inside a tank or a prison house; it is a way of being in the midst of a world. To be on the 'inside' of a language is to have a world opened up to you, and thus be on the 'outside' of it at the same time. The same is true of the human body. Having a body is a way of going to work on the world, not a

way of being walled off from it. It would be odd to complain that I could come at things better if only I could shuck off my flesh. It would be like complaining that I could talk to you better if only this crude, ineffectual stuff called speech did not get in the way.

(Eagleton 2003: 166)

For Eagleton, 'Having a body is a way of going to work on the world.' The emphasis on the materiality of existence, and hence of semiotic production, is helpful. I wonder, though, if Eagleton has gone quite far enough. Though he sees it as 'like having a language', for him the givenness of the corporeal seems to be its dominant, defining property. What Kirsty's conception of role-play suggests, on the other hand, is a view of the body as a semiotic and heuristic resource. This is precisely what Monica's students exemplify and enact: with extraordinary economy, they use a wide range of resources – language, gesture, movement, clothing – to inhabit and explore the roles and relationships that they create. These resources are both irreducibly physical and, at the same time, inescapably cultural. The students' meanings are made and mediated intertextually, in and through culture. That is true of the words spoken but also of the gestures made – of Kemi spinning an imaginary steering wheel or of Ali going down on his knees to beg a video game from his father.

From one perspective, then, this is just another strategy, a remarkably circuitous way of preparing students to read a section of a Shakespeare play. But it is a strategy that, by implication, offers different answers to the question of what English is for, and to the question of what literary texts are for. There is an unfashionable inexplicitness in relation to learning objectives, in contrast with Neville's practice noted above: Monica asks the students to rehearse

and perform their improvisations, but does not even hint at the rationale for this activity. Because of this, the students remain free to draw on a wide repertoire of cultural resources, to make meaning with all the means at their disposal. And thus, when the class gets to read Richard's scene with Anne, his words are filled with a much denser semiotic load, a much richer and more complicated network of cultural understandings of persuasion and power relations. Around Richard's voice echo the voices of the students' role-play characters and of the diverse texts and genres on which these improvisations drew. When the students see Richard fall on his knees before Anne, their sense of the complex and contradictory meanings of this gesture, the irony of Richard's apparent submission working as a sign of his control, is informed and inflected by their memory of Ali kneeling before his father in the classroom-become-a-street. I want to suggest, therefore, that the Bakhtinian concept of heteroglossia (Bakhtin 1981, and chapter 2, above) applies here not just to language but also to the other modes employed by the students in their role-plays. Furthermore, this multimodal multivoicedness is rendered possible by the teacher's generous – loosely-defined, unprescriptive – conception of the activity.

I want to suggest, too, that what happens in these role-plays is precisely the dialectical movement between everyday (or 'spontaneous') and scientific concepts that Vygotsky identified as the salient property of instruction (see chapter 2, above). Students make new meanings from the material at their disposal: that is what is happening when they draw on the cultural resources available to them to create the situations, characters and interactions of their

role-plays. If these role-plays then enable them to make sense of Richard's wooing of Anne, to understand more, and differently, what such a scene might mean, their reading of Shakespeare then enables them to understand more, and differently, the performances that they have created.

Barthes' distinction between readerly and writerly texts is of relevance here:

Our literature is characterized by a pitiless divorce which the literary institution maintains between the producer of the text and its user, between its owner and its customer, between its author and its reader. This reader is thereby plunged into a kind of idleness – he is intransitive; he is, in short, *serious*: instead of functioning himself, instead of gaining access to the magic of the signifier, to the pleasure of writing, he is left with no more than the poor freedom either to accept or to reject the text: reading is nothing more than a *referendum*. Opposite the writerly text, then, is its countervalue, its negative, reactive value: what can be read, but not written: the *readerly*. We call any readerly text a classic text.

(Barthes 1973/1990: 4)

The distinction, though, is not between categories of text but between ways of reading. In the lesson that I analysed above, *A View from the Bridge* remains, to a large extent, readerly: the divorce between producer and user is one that the assessment criteria, attended to by the teacher, enforce: the students' task is, from a distance, to identify and appreciate (as a customer, a user) the devices whereby the writer achieves his effects. And yet, even here, the divide threatens to break down, to collapse under the weight of the multivoicedness of the production of the text in the classroom. What Monica's pedagogy does is to transform *Richard III* into a writerly text: in her classroom as they produce the multimodal texts of their role-plays, students gain access to 'the magic of signifier, the pleasure of writing.'

What emerges from both lessons is a version of English that cannot be encapsulated within the official discourse of current policy. These are ways of engaging with literary texts, these are forms of pedagogy, these are moments of learning that are worth attending to, worth describing and attempting to theorise. There are, to be sure, significant differences between the two lessons: differences in emphasis, differences in the extent to which assessment regimes exert a prominent, shaping influence, differences, too, that are the product of the particular histories and institutional positioning of the participants. But there are also important points of commonality: in the insistence on the importance of specific acts of cultural making (rather than on tasks designed merely to inculcate generalisable skills) and in the attention that is paid to the agency of the learners, an agency that is historically situated and made manifest in multimodal social semiotic activity.

## Chapter 9

### Reading together over time

In earlier chapters, I have tended to focus attention on events within a single lesson. In this chapter, I want to make an argument for the importance of attending to longer timescales in making sense of the reading, and the learning, that might be accomplished within a single lesson.

#### 9.1 The 'everyday' in *A View from the Bridge*

In chapter 7, I looked at the way that the students in Neville's year 10 class were developing a reading of Miller's play, a reading which was significantly inflected by their sense of their own (social) class positioning. When Darren asks about the meaning of the play's title, his question opens up a discussion of representation, of the society that Miller represents and the perspective from which it is represented. Matthew's contribution to this discussion, as Neville acknowledges, carries an echo of an earlier lesson. Matthew suggests that the view from the bridge is of 'an everyday thing' (see above, chapter 7, page 12). In the context of the single lesson, the force of this suggestion is not apparent: what gives it a greater (and different) semiotic load is the associations that derive from its place in an earlier argument.

Two months earlier, in the class's first encounter with the text of *A View from the Bridge*, Neville had used a brief extract from the opening few pages of the script to induct his students into the practices of close reading and textual annotation. In that lesson, speculating on Eddie Carbone's state of mind as he returns home after a day's work on the docks, Malcolm had drawn



attention to the stage direction, '*EDDIE ... hangs up his cap and jacket*' (Miller 1955/1995: 5):

[22:57]

**Malcolm:** I think he looks forward to going to work, sounds like he's got a boring life

**Gavin:** Oh yeah, that's what I was going to ask

**Malcolm:** like some normal things, he goes into his house, hangs up his jacket, and that's the end, like

**Teacher:** excellent,

**Malcolm:** boring

**Teacher:** just a sec, Gavin I'll be with you in a second ... OK, I'm just going to paste this onto a place where I've got a bit more space and I want to look carefully at what Malcolm has just said. He has picked out a line in the stage direction and Malcolm has used the word normal. Malcolm, would you mind if I used the word 'everyday'? Yeah, normal, everyday things. Just, Mutib, just in this line, he hangs up his hat and jacket, Malcolm has seen a kind of routine, OK, another day left on that ship, he hangs up his hat and jacket, I haven't got a copy with me, *A View from the Bridge* is a very, very thin play, every single word matters, Arthur Miller has put every word there for a reason.

(6 January 2006)

But Neville's use of 'everyday' as a synonym for 'normal' is contested by

Gavin:

[24:39]

**Gavin:** you shouldn't put everyday, though, everyday things, you should just put normal things, because when we watched that film last time [*On the Waterfront*] everyone wears jacket and hat

**Teacher:** good, excellent, Gavin, it's not just him, but by everyday I mean they do it day in, day out, it's like coming to school is an everyday thing, you just do it day after day, does that make sense?

**Salman:** we're not allowed to wear non-uniform, getting told to take off your jacket ...

**JY:** so, Salman, follow that through more, when Eddie comes in, hangs up his hat and jacket, what's that signalling?

**Salman:** that [3 seconds] he's a normal person

**JY:** but, what's the act of hanging up his hat and jacket, what is he moving from to?

**Martin:** work to home

**JY:** work to home, exactly so

**?:** oh

**Teacher:** OK so it's a symbol, in a way, isn't it? This is saying, the jacket and cap he wears at work, he hangs it up, that is the end of my working day, I am at home now.

(6 January 2006)

I confess that I am still not sure of Gavin's grounds for contesting the use of the word 'everyday'. What is clear, though, is that the word does not have the same sense for him that it has for Neville.<sup>1</sup> Gavin's interest, at this moment, is in a normativity that is historically situated. Neville had shown the class extracts from *On the Waterfront* as a way into the world of *A View from the Bridge*: one of the things that Gavin has taken from the film is a sense of what longshoremen were likely to have worn in the 1950s. Is it, then, that 'everyday' fails to communicate the historical specificity of Eddie's clothing? I don't know. I am also uncertain about the motives for Salman's intervention: to what extent is he exploiting the discussion to indulge in one of his favourite counter-scripts (the unfairness of school life) and how much is he drawing on his knowledge of the codes and conventions of schooling to make sense of Eddie's actions? But the effect of Salman's contribution is to enrich the semiotic significance, for the class, of the stage direction: to emphasise the sense of the normal and to encourage an identification with Eddie and with the class whom he represents. And thus the attention that was given to the word in that earlier lesson means that when, two months later, Matthew suggests that what the play represents is the everyday, Neville is right to take this as, in effect, a referencing of the earlier discussion: the *everyday* here has a meaning that is specific to the class's shared history of engagement with Miller's play.

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<sup>1</sup> On the Vygotskian distinction between sense and meaning, see chapter 2, above.

This is a small, slight example of the importance of attending to the accumulation of meanings across time in capturing a class's experience of a shared text. I turn now to a more substantial instance of this phenomenon in Monica's Year 9 class, in the early weeks of their reading of *Richard III*.

## 9.2 What does Richard want?

By 1 December 2005, Monica's class had watched the first act of *Richard III* in two versions, the Olivier (Olivier 1955) and the McKellen (Loncraine 1995). They had read the script as far as the end of act one, and had analysed still images, some from a wide range of productions and some that were frames taken from the two film versions.

In the lesson on 1 December, the students were in groups of four. Monica started the lesson by giving each group a large piece of sugar paper and a pen. 'What does Richard want?' she asked. The students talked about the question in their groups, then wrote answers on the sugar paper. After about four minutes, the pieces of sugar paper were passed around the class, so that each group had a different piece in front of them. This gave them the opportunity to read another group's answers to the first question as they began to address Monica's second question, which was about the obstacles that lay in Richard's way. After four minutes, the process was repeated, the pieces of sugar paper were passed on again, and Monica asked her third question: 'What has Richard achieved so far?' The groups were given four more minutes and then the class was brought together to share their answers to these three questions.

[12:38]

**Teacher:** OK, right, let's see where we are. OK, right, just keep the one's that you've got. Jo, Jo, why are you out of your chair? [3 secs]

OK, um, Nazrul, can you give me, um, what did Richard want?

**Nazrul:** Power [indistinct – others are talking – volunteering answers]

**Teacher:** All right, one at a time. Right, you think he wanted power. Ali?

**Ali:** Um, marry Anne.

**Teacher:** He wanted to marry Anne. Billy?

**Billy:** He wanted a family.

**Teacher:** He wanted a family. Um, Anhar.

**Anhar:** To become king.

**Teacher:** He wanted to become king. Kemi?

**Kemi:** He wanted to be noticed.

**Teacher:** To be noticed, good.

**Helen:** He wanted fame

**Teacher:** Fame

**Helen:** and luxury

**Teacher:** OK, good, the things that go with being a king, good.

(1 December 2005)

These answers, deftly orchestrated by Monica, come thick and fast. Students are keen to contribute, confident that they have things to say. The answers show something of the students' knowledge of the play, of Richard's character and motives. The responses are framed, then, by ways of reading a literary/dramatic text such as *Richard III* that are well-established, familiar, part of the routine business of English classrooms. In a tradition stretching back to A.C. Bradley (and beyond him to Coleridge), Shakespearean roles are discussed as if they were stable, psychologically consistent characters, whose motives can be known, analysed and deployed to understand and explain their actions.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For approaches that problematise this understanding of character, see, for example, Cloud (1991).

What is noticeable about the answers provided by the students is the extent to which they seem to build on previous contributions. This might be seen to work in different ways. Billy's 'He wanted a family' could be construed more as a response to Ali's point, that Richard wanted to marry Anne, than to any information directly present in the text or the films. Is the connection that Billy makes between marriage and family/procreation merely the reiteration of a cliché, or does it have particular reference to the significance of the family within the feudal system? Is Billy, in other words, harking back to Nazrul's original claim that what Richard wants is power? And is Anhar's contribution, that Richard wanted to become king, in any sense related to the previous focus on marriage and family? His later intervention (see below) would suggest that he was, at the very least, working towards an interpretation of Richard's motives in which these different strands were integrated.

What, then of Kemi's 'He wanted to be noticed'? Where does this phrase come from, and why did she choose it? Kemi, a dominant personality in the class, usually seems intensely aware of others' interest in her. Is she seeing Richard through the lens of her own classroom persona? Is she demonstrating an awareness of the rules of the literary critical genre – the psychological interpretation of character – and even of the specific sub-genre in which moral iniquity becomes reinterpreted, reframed, as psychological deficit – the depraved recoded as the deprived? Is she dipping into her plentiful cultural reserves to find the most appropriate cliché? Helen's suggestions both corroborate Kemi's – the goal of fame accentuates a social

(and even theatrical) perspective on kingship, while 'luxury' complements this with a nod in the direction of the material benefits to be gained.

What Monica does next is to push harder:

[13:34]

**Teacher:** OK, good, the things that go with being a king, good. Do you think, um, Chris, do you think you can separate out the, this is a hard question, I'm going to give you a little minute to think about it, all right, and if you, if Chris doesn't know the answer and you think you might be able to, see if you can come up with the answer. Do you think you can separate out the wanting to be married and the wanting to have a family from the wanting to become king? [2 secs] Have a think about that question because it's quite a hard question. [3 sec] Do you think you might have an answer Chris?

(1 December 2005).

Responding to the catalogue of desires produced by the students, Monica wants to explore with the class the relationship between the items on the list. Signalled very clearly as a 'hard question', and explicitly directed towards one of the high-achieving students, Monica's intervention transforms the activity into something much more intellectually demanding than a mere report-back. She is making clear that there are ways of participating in this discussion that go beyond reading the words written on the piece of sugar paper. Chris is being invited to synthesise the findings, and in so doing to develop a better understanding of the relationship between family and power within a feudal context, within the world of the play. For the moment, at any rate, Chris does not rise to the challenge; instead, he might almost be taking his cue from Kemi's use of the discursive practices of problem-page psychology:

[14:10]

**Chris:** Maybe he was lonely.

**Teacher:** So, you think you think you can separate, that maybe he was lonely and he wanted a wife and

[Kemi raises her hand]

{he wanted a family

**Chris:** {king was about wanting power

**Teacher:** Yeah, OK, good.

(1 December 2005)

In this interchange, both Monica and Chris are quoting the words and phrases of earlier contributors. This is a development, then, but it is one that alludes to its connection with what has gone before. Chris's answer is not what Monica was looking for, but it is not dismissed. Other students are invited to participate:

[14:24]

**Teacher:** Anybody got any other ideas about that?

[Teacher points at Kemi, whose hand is still in the air, Kemi starts to speak]

No, hang on, we'll take, all right, cos you answer lots of questions, sorry, I'll come to you second, I'll ask Anhar first.

**Anhar:** I think no because, because he just married her because he wants to become king. If he didn't marry her, he can't be king.

(1 December 2005)

Monica's conduct of the discussion is mindful of timescales and developments beyond the single lesson (see chapter 5, above); her explanation of the decision not to take Kemi immediately places this exchange within a longer-term perspective: this is one of many such occasions, and part of the teacher's role, it is implied, is to encourage a more equal access to speaking rights. Anhar's contribution here renders explicit the link between marriage and the throne that was, as I indicated above, possibly implicit in his earlier intervention.

[14:37]

**Teacher:** OK, he just married her because  
{he wanted to become king.

**Billy:** {Miss, what was the question?

[Subhan raises his hand]

**Teacher:** The question, it was a hard question I think, I don't know if I phrased it right, but I was asking if you could separate out the wanting to be married and have a family which Chris sort of said you could by saying {that he was lonely

? **Ali:** {?? [indistinct]

**Teacher:** from wanting to be king, so Anhar is disagreeing and saying he doesn't think you can separate {it out because

**Billy:** {that's what I think

**Teacher:** all right .. {the wanting to be married to Anne is part of

**Perry:** {do you know what he done, man?

**Teacher:** Ssh! wanting to become king,

[Caroline raises her hand]

**Teacher:** just a minute, Perry, we don't need to have that kind of comment and don't make it again, please, it's disruptive to other people's work ....

(1 December 2005)

It is worth dwelling on what Monica is doing in this sequence. She echoes Anhar's point, then, in response to Billy's question, acknowledges that what is being discussed is difficult. She draws attention to the fact that Anhar's view is opposed to Chris's. What Monica doesn't do at this stage is equally significant: she doesn't rebuke or criticise Billy for not paying attention; she doesn't move on as soon as she has received the answer she is looking for; she doesn't present herself as the fount of all knowledge. There is a deep modesty, and an open acknowledgement of the shared struggle with and through language, in her 'I don't know if I phrased it right.'

There are aspects of the exchange with Perry that are simply not captured by the transcript as I have presented it. I am not even sure if the sexualised meaning of Perry's words is clear – I am not sure how much of this meaning



was conveyed through tone – but what he is alluding to is that Richard had sex with Anne. The tone of Monica's response is very calm and measured; the emphasis is firmly on the inappropriateness of his contribution to the conversation, rather than, say, on any transgression of the bounds of decency. More than this, though, Monica's response affirms that what is going on in the classroom should be construed as 'work': meanings are being made, struggled over, contested.

[15:19]

**Teacher:** [acknowledging Subhan's raised hand] yeah

**Subhan:** I agree with what Anhar said, yeah, because in the film, yeah, he says 'I will have her but I will not have her for long' and if he marries her and becomes the king, yeah, and if he doesn't like stay with her he can still be king, so like they couldn't get him out from the king.

(1 December 2005)

Subhan's hand had been raised for thirty-seven seconds. He waited patiently for his turn, and when it came his first move was to signal agreement with Anhar. To see this as (merely) good manners, or obedience, or a display of, in the current jargon, appropriate learning behaviour, does not seem to me to be adequate. There is, I think, a seriousness about it which is to do with taking the discussion seriously and, simultaneously, to do with taking other students seriously. The point I have made elsewhere (chapter 5), in observing the class six months earlier, about the development of a relationship with Monica over time, and about the development of ways of working, is instantiated here in Subhan's intervention. And what he does, unprompted, is to provide textual evidence to support his point. It may not be word perfect, but he has remembered Richard's 'I'll have her but I will not keep her long' (I.iii.233).

[15:36]

**Teacher:** OK, good, good answer ... um, Caroline, what do you think?

**Caroline:** um, yeah, I think you can't either because, um, part of becoming the king is to get with Anne so that is why he wants to get with Anne so that he can become king and to get further into that particular plan, so

**Teacher:** OK, good, what about you, Lucy

**Lucy:** I was going to say that if he marries Anne he can have his own kids and he will be remembered because he had sons

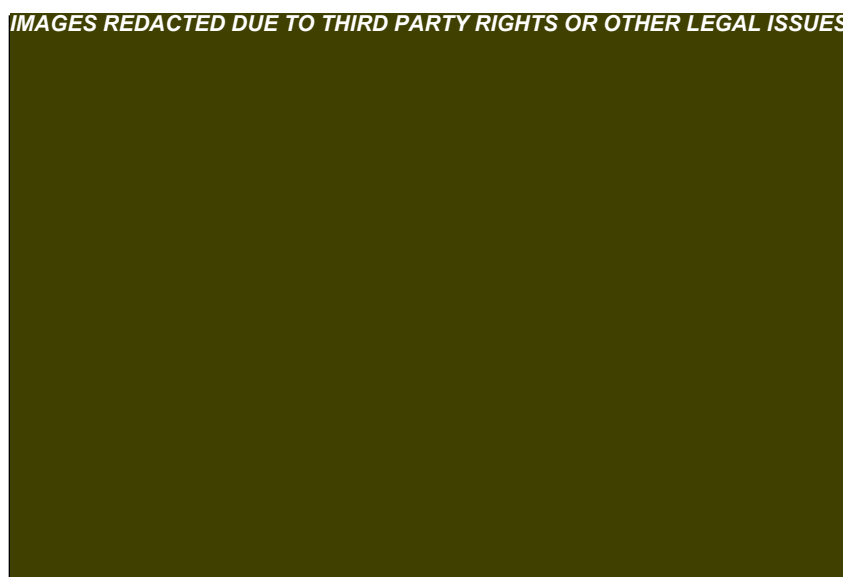
**Teacher:** and they'll become kings after him so that's sort of connected to that as well, excellent, can you think, how was he in the film after he had been chatting Anne up in the play?

(1 December 2005)

There's a marked inclusiveness about these interventions. Both Caroline and Lucy are less concerned to introduce new material than to support others who have already spoken and to synthesise the earlier contributions with the interpretation offered by Anhar and Subhan.

What is revealed by an analysis of the language in this three-minute segment of a lesson is very impressive. In what the students say, in the ways in which they interact with each other and with Monica, there is a great deal of evidence of well-established practices. This is a class which is used to talk, used to listening carefully to one another: even Perry's transgressive intervention tends to emphasise that the rules by which this talk is conducted are well understood. This is a group of students who are able to use talk as the medium through which important intellectual work can be accomplished collaboratively; these are students who are confident in their ability to make sense of a complex text, confident that they will have things to say about it.

But the digital video recording of the lesson enables other perspectives on the lesson. Sitting at the front of the classroom, underneath the interactive white board, were Jo, Mutib and Foyzur, none of whom contributed to the whole-class talk in this segment of the lesson. For most of the time, Foyzur was leaning forward, his head resting on the table in front of him. At one point, just before Perry makes his comment, Jo, sitting opposite Foyzur, also leans forward, her head on the table, her posture mirroring Foyzur's. She maintains this position for a few seconds, then sits up again and opens her copy of the play. She browses through the pages, looking at the pictures (it is a recent Cambridge School Shakespeare edition of the play, illustrated with images taken from performances). Twenty-five seconds later (just as Caroline is beginning to speak), Foyzur lifts his head from the table, opens his copy of the play, yawns and begins to flip through the pages. Mutib, sitting to Foyzur's left, follows suit. Glances are exchanged between Mutib and Jo.



**Figure 9.1**  
15:38, 1 December 2005

As Monica moves on to take responses to her second question ('What's stopping him from getting it?'), Jo has put her head back down on the desk. Then Perry, who is out of camera, towards the back of the room, passes a message to Mutib, who is looking at Perry: he suggests that they should look at the image on page 147 of their copies of *Richard III*. Subhan also exchanges glances with Perry and with Mutib. As the students find the image, there is a burst of fairly loud laughter – and a further exchange of (conspiratorial, knowing) glances. At this point, Foyzur turns his head around towards Subhan and Caroline, who are sitting together, directly behind him. The book is open in his hands, and he grins at Subhan and Caroline before turning back, making eye contact with Jo. These movements are echoed, almost immediately, by Mutib, who turns his whole torso around so that he is facing Subhan and Caroline.

IMAGES REDACTED DUE TO THIRD PARTY RIGHTS OR OTHER LEGAL ISSUES



**Figure 9.2**

17:33, 1 December 2005

The laughter has alerted Monica to the fact that something else is going on. She notices Mutib, and stops to reprimand him:

[17:16]

**Teacher:** ... Mutib, Mutib, if you were speaking you would really want people to be listening to you

**Mutib:** What? I didn't know no-one was speaking

**Teacher:** No, well I was speaking, OK, and then I'm going to ask Ian a question.

(1 December 2005)

Monica carries on with the lesson. While she does so, Foyzur balances his book on his head (see figure 9.2), and Mutib turns round to smile at Subhan. The book stays on Foyzur's head for a few seconds, then falls to the ground. He picks it up, places it over his face, then pushes it to the back of his head while he leans forward. Briefly, he rests his head on the table, then sits up again and exchanges glances with Jo.

About fifty seconds have elapsed since Monica last spoke to Mutib. In this time, the discussion has continued, focusing on the obstacles confronting Richard. Now she seeks to bring Mutib into that discussion:

[18:15]

**Teacher:** Mutib, what did you have for what was stopping him apart from the king, the brother being a king?

**Mutib:** um [3 secs] what stopped him? [reading from the paper in front of him] he was short and ugly

**Teacher:** [2 secs] OK

**Mutib:** I didn't write that it was someone

**Teacher:** you didn't write that, you can't think back to your own writing on that?

**Mutib:** no, but what stopped him was ... [4 secs]  
[to Foyzur, sitting next to him] what did you write for what stopped him?

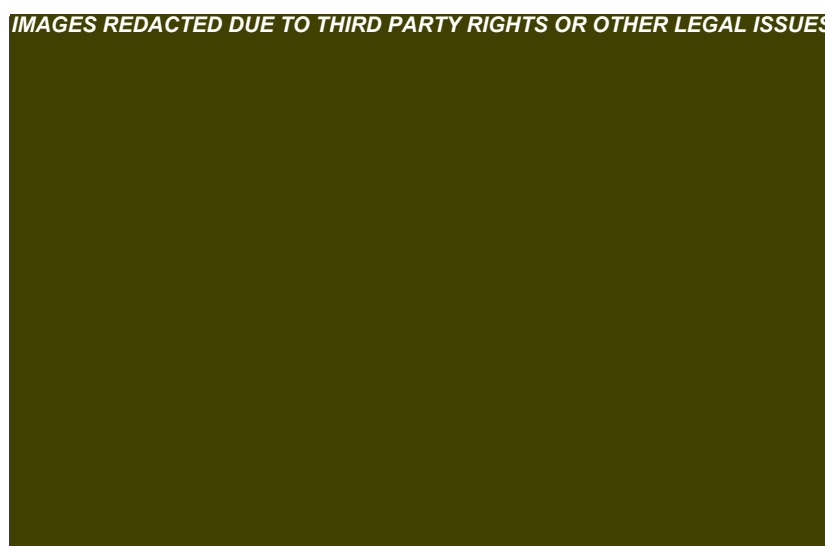
**Teacher:** you can't remember, OK, um, Ali, um sorry, yeah, Ali

(1 December 2005)

Put in the spotlight by Monica, Mutib has tried to respond appropriately. But he hasn't been following the conversation, so he has to resort to the sugar paper that is on the table in front of him. He picks up the paper and reads

(‘He was short and ugly’). Realising that these words are not adequate, he distances himself from them: ‘I didn’t write that ...’. Monica tried to elicit a different response from him, and he turns to Foyzur for help. Foyzur shrugs his shoulders, shakes his head slightly, and Monica moves on to another student, and to the third of her questions: what has Richard achieved so far?

A further seventy seconds go by, in which Ali and Helen suggest answers (Richard has won Anne over, and he has got respect). Foyzur, Jo, Subhan continue to exchange glances, to smile at each other, and there is a short, mouthed conversation between Caroline and Mutib (again turning round to face her). There is no indication that any of them is paying attention to the formal business of the lesson – the teacher’s script, in Gutierrez *et al.*’s (1995) terms. And then Foyzur raises his hand.



**Figure 9.3**

19:53, 1 December 2005

[19:53]

[Foyzur puts his hand up]

**Teacher:** Anhar

**Anhar:** he’s the king

**Teacher:** he hasn’t yet become the king, not in the bit that we’ve watched so far

**Foyzur:** I think that he's like the main character, he's taken over, like the audience are more interested in him than the other characters.

(1 December 2005)

I want to make two observations about Foyzur's intervention in the lesson.

First, what he says – the way in which he talks about Richard and about the play – is, within the context of the first twenty minutes of this lesson, unprecedented. If the whole-class conversation has provided impressive evidence of the students' knowledge of the play, of Richard's actions and of plausible interpretations of his character, no attention had been paid to the play *as a play*. Monica's questions had not encouraged such a perspective: they were focused, as I have suggested earlier, on unproblematised notions of character and of character study. What Foyzur does is to open up a new field of inquiry. He directs attention to the ways in which meanings are made, to the relationship between actor and audience, to the techniques whereby perspectives are established and privileged.

Foyzur's remark reveals a remarkable understanding of the complexity of theatrical/dramatic relationships – the actor to the role, the character to other characters within the world of the play, the actor/character to the audience – and the specific and very powerful ways in which these relationships are established in the early part of *Richard III*. What Foyzur gestures at here is not merely a more elaborate version of Kemi's 'He wanted to be noticed': in place of character analysis, he offers an account of Richard that pays attention to the artifice of the play, to its constructed nature – and to the theatrical nature of Richard's power.

I want to say more about Foyzur's reading of Richard. Before I do, though, I want to make a second point about his intervention. Although it is, quite clearly, *a propos* – it is a direct (and brilliant) answer to Monica's third question ('How far has Richard got?') – it appears to come from nowhere. Not building on other contributions to the lesson, not developed from the earlier group discussion, it emanates from a student who has shown no sign of interest in the lesson up to this moment (and many outward and visible signs of interest in a series of other events that might constitute a recalcitrant counterscript to the lesson, as Gutierrez *et al.* might see it).

### 9.3 The pre-history of an idea, or who did the work?

If we ask where Foyzur's insight comes from, we have to start with a recognition that we do not know. There is no definitive answer, no sure means of establishing the genesis of his idea. And it is worth making a point about the elusiveness of learning: we may recognise evidence of learning happening (or, to introduce another aspect to the conundrum, having happened), but we cannot trace the thread of learning back to its source. What I want to suggest in the rest of this chapter is that it is possible to reconstruct a history of Foyzur's idea in the work that had been done in previous lessons. What this reconstruction provides is evidence of the inadequacy of the 'Robinson Crusoe model of epistemology' (Ilyenkov 1960/2008: 40) and of the need for an account of learning that takes account of the social and historical nature of consciousness (see chapter 2, above).



Before I do so, though, I want to offer an explanation for Foyzur's intervention in the lesson. We don't know what was going on in Foyzur's head. The digital video footage does provide data, however, that may be interpreted as evidence for what triggered Foyzur's apparently sudden engagement with the lesson. Less than two minutes before he speaks, his friend and neighbour, Mutib, has been addressed directly by Monica. I have already suggested that Mutib is dissatisfied by his contribution to the lesson, and that he sought to enlist Foyzur's help in producing a more impressive answer: tone of voice, gaze, posture and expression all support this interpretation of the event and of the significance of this moment for both students. Whether to deflect censure from Mutib or himself, or to (re-)assert his own intellectual credentials after he has appeared tongue-tied, it seems to me that the immediate trigger for Foyzur's speech is provided by the earlier failure to produce a satisfactory answer.

The significance of this is that what moves Foyzur to speak is not, in any simple sense, the sudden appearance of an idea but rather the minutely complex social interactions of the classroom, in which may simultaneously be implicated feelings of awkwardness, solidarity, embarrassment and pride, relationships with peers and with the teacher, relationships that have developed over time, and are still developing. Thus, even in a lesson segment that might seem, up to the moment of Foyzur's intervention, to support a reading of what is happening as script (constructed by Monica and some of the students) coexisting alongside a separate and oppositional counterscript (produced by Perry, Foyzur, Mutib, Jo and others), the students'

relations to the script – the work of the lesson – are much more complex than such a reading would suggest.

In an attempt to uncover the process that led to Foyzur's intervention in this lesson, I want to explore some episodes in English lessons observed by me in the preceding fortnight. I should make it clear that I am not proposing a causal chain: what I am suggesting is that Foyzur's intervention might helpfully be seen within a context larger than the single lesson, and as a contribution to a longer conversation.

On 15 November, Monica had asked the students, working in pairs, to look at a selection of images of Richard III, images that she had found through an internet search. Each pair of students was given a single image mounted in the centre of a blank sheet of A3 paper. The first part of the task was to talk about, and then record, what the students could see in the image. Monica then explained the second part:

[18:16]

**Teacher:** the second thing I want you think about is what can you infer, Helen, what do I mean by that, asking what can you infer?

**Helen:** what you think's happening

**Teacher:** OK, what you think's happening

**Ali:** um, I was about to say something else

**Teacher:** tell me what you were about to say

**Ali:** like between, um, [3 secs] I was going to say, reading, reading between the lines

**Teacher:** reading between the lines, OK, good, would you like to say a little bit about what that means, reading between the lines

**Chris:** make a guess

**Teacher:** making a guess about

**Chris:** something, like the

**Nazrul:** {predictions

**Chris:** {first picture you showed, he's got a crown on so we infer that he's a king

**Teacher:** OK, good, excellent, so making an educated, making a guess, if you like, about what's happening, using some information that's already there,

**Kemi:** miss

**Teacher:** Kemi

**Kemi:** are you making your own interpretation of it?

(15 November 2005)

I'm not sure how tenable in practice or theory is the distinction between the first and second parts of the task. Is it possible, in other words, to engage in a meaningful conversation about a text without interpreting it? Can one describe what one sees without interpretation? Chris's point about the crown is a good one – but to name the thing sitting on the person's head as a crown is also, inevitably, an act of interpretation. But what happens in this part of the lesson is that students begin to explore what might be involved in the task – and they do so in a way that foregrounds their interpretive role. Prompted by Monica, Kemi and Ali take this further:

[19:08]

**Teacher:** very good, making your own interpretation, can you give me an example, say {a little bit

**Kemi:** {say if you saw the picture, like one person could think that he could be, er, posing as the king or something like that, and other people could think that he's actually the proper king

**Teacher:** OK, yeah

**Ali:** like writing your own opinions and writing what kind of a perspective do you get of that character

**Teacher:** OK, good, I want you think about as well, there are sort of three things, about these, because when you think about the play, ... so these people are all actors, so they're people, a person who takes a part, because you all play parts in, you all do role play, and you all think, and sometimes we do the same scene and different people do it in different ways, don't they, it's what the actor thinks about that part, it's what, how the actor interprets the part of Richard, so there's the person, yeah.

(15 November 2005)

*Richard III* exists in the lesson in multiple forms. Lurking somewhere in the background, there may be the idea of the play as a canonical text, the text on which these students will be examined six months later in their Key Stage 3 tests. But Richard is more obviously present in different incarnations, in the form of the production-based images which have been distributed to each pair: because of the plurality of images, as Monica insists, there is space for students to perceive each image as an interpretation. Already, too, Monica is inviting students to make the move that Foyzur makes two weeks later: to see the play as a performance, to consider the interpretive possibilities, to make links between the actor's adoption of the role of Richard and the role-plays that are a prominent – and much-relished – feature of the class's experience of English.

Six days later, in a lesson on 21 November, the sense of *Richard III* as a performance text was reinforced when the class watched the openings of two film versions, one from 1995, directed by Richard Loncraine and starring Ian McKellen, the other the 1955 production, starring and directed by Laurence Olivier. In the last ten minutes or so of the lesson, Monica invited students to compare the two beginnings. Mutib, holding the two DVD cases and referring to the images of the title role on each front cover, began to describe the mood of the two actors playing Richard. Caroline expressed a preference for the McKellen version and, pressed by Monica, explained why:

[47:46]

**Caroline:** I dunno because when you look at his face, when he's round his friends and that it looks like he wouldn't do that, but when you see him before when he shot them men

and that, then you can think he looks like a person who would do that

**Teacher:** OK, good, so he's able to change the way that he looks depending on the people that he's with, yep, OK, excellent.

(21 November 2005)

Immediately, then, Caroline has opened up a consideration of the character as a dissembler – the character as, in other words, a consummate actor; more than this, though, she is able to acknowledge the ways in which our reading of the character is framed and shaped by the opening sequence, with its representation of Richard's killing of Edward and Henry at the Battle of Tewkesbury. This sense of the film as constructed, as the product of directorial choices, also informs Ali's reflection on his uncertainty about the kind of film – the genre – that he was watching:

[49:53]

**Ali:** yeah, a man looks like Hitler, yeah, and I thought the film was going to be like drama without the man like actually facing the camera, then I found out that it was something else other than drama

**Teacher:** can I ask you about those bits when he's actually speaking to the camera, what's happening in those bits?

Lucy

**Lucy:** he's like saying what's on his mind

**Teacher:** he's saying what's on his mind, so he's saying to the audience what's on his mind.

(21 November 2005)

For Ali, it would seem that a (film) drama is defined by its adherence to naturalist conventions: thus, when McKellen (who 'looks like Hitler') speaks to camera, these conventions are broken – so Ali concludes that what he is watching is 'something else other than drama.' This provides an opportunity for Monica, assisted by Lucy, to explore the function of the soliloquy, providing access to Richard's thoughts and thereby establishing the

relationship between the central character and the audience. And, of course, Foyzur's intervention more than a week later is based on an understanding of the force of the soliloquy as a theatrical device – an understanding that might be construed as a development from this moment.

In the course of this discussion, it becomes clear that there is a difference among the students as to which version they prefer. Helen advances the opinion that the Olivier is a more authentic production, because it was closer to what she had imagined, to her sense of historicity:

[50:27]

[the] one that we just watched was more like the Richard the third that I think about, but the first one I didn't think that the man would be like that, when they talk about Richard the third I think about the olden like kings and queens and dukes.

(21 November 2005)

Foyzur takes a contrary view:

[51:07]

I think, the first one was more nicer because it was like 1930s and I don't know, the films are really nice, yeah, with the settings, but when it's set in like mediaeval times, yeah, it's kind of boring like Robin Hood and stuff, so it's like, and when the man, the second one [Olivier], was saying the words, it wasn't that interesting because, like, we know what happens and it's exactly like the play, the Shakespeare play, but the other one [the McKellen version] was a completely different setting, different characters ... yeah, and you don't know what's going to happen, like it's going to be something different to Shakespeare.

(21 November 2005)

The difference, then, is an aesthetic one; but more is at stake here than a personal preference for (or aversion to) men in tights. Foyzur accepts that the Olivier is authentic ('it's exactly like the play'), but what for Helen was a

confirmation of her prior expectations makes the whole thing just too familiar for Foyzur. What he values in the McKellen interpretation is its novelty – ‘different setting, different characters’ – and hence its unpredictability. Is Foyzur’s appreciation of the uncertainty of McKellen’s performance as Richard – his enjoyment of the fact that he doesn’t quite know how the play is going to be realised in this production – a contributory factor in his developing sense of the dramatic power of McKellen-as-Richard, the grip that he has over the attention of Foyzur as his audience?

The following day, the class has another English lesson. It starts with the short period of private reading that is departmental policy for all key stage 3 classes. Then, after about eight minutes, Monica introduces the first activity. She has printed off still images from the two films watched the previous day, and mounted them on pieces of A3 paper. She wants students, working in pairs, to analyse the images. Before the activity starts, she works with the whole class to assemble the questions that they will use to structure their analysis of the images:

[8:16]

**Teacher:** OK, the first thing that we’re going to do today is that you’re going to look at some still pictures from the video that we looked at, the two videos that we watched yester--not videos, two DVDs, two productions of *Richard the Third* and I want you just to, first of all, to think about who’s in that picture, who do you think these people are [3 secs] OK, so the first thing is, who’s who’s there [writes on the board – out of shot]

secondly, what do you think they are saying [writes on board] OK, that’s the second thing, what do you think the third thing might be?

[4 secs]

**Ali:** setting

**Subhan:** plot

**Teacher:** OK [writes] that's a good one, erm,  
?: what time is it in?  
**Teacher:** let me just take Ali's, I think 'where do you think  
**Ali:** {it's set  
**Teacher:** {they are?}', that's the setting  
**Subhan:** what about the plot?  
**Teacher:** um, what's happening. Yeah? Good, [writes] 'what  
is happening?'  
**Subhan:** what has happened  
**Teacher:** or 'what has hap- just happened?'  
**Billy:** or what's going to happen  
**Teacher:** [laughs] OK  
[10:08]  
**Ali:** what we infer from that?  
**Teacher:** [4 secs – Teacher is writing Billy's question] OK  
...OK, excellent, 'what can you infer?' [writing Ali's question  
on the board]  
who can remind me what that means?  
**Caroline:** like, what can you get from that picture, like what  
can you guess  
**Teacher:** right, good, what can you guess, reading between  
the lines.

(22 November 2005)

The activity is similar to the one that students were participating in seven days earlier. Now, however, their reading of the images is inflected by their knowledge of the cinematic texts from which the stills are derived. So, right from the start, Ali and Subhan volunteer 'setting' and 'plot' as foci for investigation, thereby placing it within the analytic frame of work on (dramatic/cinematic) narrative.

The move that the teacher makes in response to the boys' suggestions is an interesting one. In phrasing the questions on the board, she omits the technical, subject-specific lexis that the students have offered, opting rather for 'where do you think they are?' and 'what is happening?' I do not know what prompted Monica to formulate the questions in this way. What it achieves, I think, is three effects. Firstly, it renders the line of enquiry



maximally accessible to everyone in the class. Secondly, it tends to direct attention towards the image itself, rather than to the film from which it had been extracted, so encouraging students to pay close attention to the meanings of the image in front of them. Thirdly, the reformulation of Subhan's 'plot' as 'what is happening?' enables Billy, simply by changing the tense of the question, to make an important leap towards interpretation and hypothesis; and Ali builds on this intervention by introducing the concept of inference.

The sequence is one that reveals a great deal about Monica's pedagogy: rather than being presented with a list of questions by the teacher, students are invited to become active participants, collaborating with the teacher in the construction of the activity. They are able to do so because this is familiar territory for them – they are used to taking part in this way. It is also worth considering the teacher's handling of the introduction of inference. Once again, as she had done a week earlier (see above), she ensures that the concept – a vital one in the reading practices that she is encouraging – is explained and explored; later in the same lesson, the value of this recursive approach becomes clear.

Students spend just over ten minutes talking with their partners about the image that they have been given. Towards the end of this time, Kirsty asks Monica, 'Miss, what does infer mean again?' Rather than construing this as an indication that a student was not paying attention when the term was defined, ten minutes or one week earlier, I want to suggest that this is

evidence of learning happening. Kirsty and her partner have been busy making inferences from the image in front of them; what is going on at this stage of the activity is, I think, that she is rehearsing what she is going to say when she reports back on her findings. She wants to check, before venturing to use the word in so public a forum, that her understanding of its meaning accords with the way Monica and the other students use it. The significance of this does not rest in the question of vocabulary alone, but rather in the conjunction of the word and the activity: Kirsty's understanding of 'infer' comes both from the definitions that are offered in her class and from her involvement in acts of inference: the sign 'inference' is becoming populated with Kirsty's intentions, and 'concepts and word meanings evolve, and ... this is a complex and delicate process' (Vygotsky 1987, quoted in chapter 2, above).

Four minutes later, when it is Kirsty and Nazrul's turn to share their findings with the class, this is what happens:

[24:35]

**Nazrul:** OK [holds up picture and shows it round] this is our picture

**Teacher:** OK, thank you

**Nazrul:** this picture shows that they're both brothers and the other brother is going to jail and that they the other brother is showing that they're going to miss each other, stuff like that

**Teacher:** so it looks like they are going to miss each other, OK, anything else?

**Kirsty:** we infer that Richard's [*inaudible*] being too nice

**Teacher:** yes, so why do you, what makes you think about the fact that he's planning something and he's being so nice, what came before, do you remember? [3 secs] can't remember? OK.

(22 November 2005)

Kirsty's attempt to share her inference is not entirely successful, even when Monica tries to help her to refer to the prior knowledge that she has of Richard that might provide an explanation for her inference that his apparent solicitude for Clarence is not to be taken at face value. Here she is working, I think, at the very limits of her powers of expression: that she is able to make this intervention at all, to contribute to the class's developing sense of Richard as an actor, is evidence of the way that the zone of proximal development is socially constructed within the class.

Billy had been looking at the same image as Kirsty and Nazrul. When he gets his turn to report back to the class, his contribution builds on theirs:

[27:16]

**Teacher:** Billy ...

**Billy:** right, this is our picture [shows it]

**Teacher:** yeah, good

**Billy:** and er it looks like he's being two-faced, he's waved his brother off who's going off to jail, he set him up, it looks like a place during the 1940s during world war two, and he's a murderer, it's Richard the third, he wants to be king, he looks like Hitler, he looks angry, yeah, he's just come out of the parliament, ... he don't look trustworthy ...

(22 November 2005)

There is a fluency – and an urgency – to Billy's delivery here: he has a lot of things to say, and he knows that this is his opportunity to say them. What he produces, though, is a list, in which items that can be read off from the image ('he looks like Hitler') and items that depend on knowledge of the play ('he set him up') are not distinguished from each other or from inferences that he is making: 'it looks like he's being two-faced', for example, is presented in a way that obscures Billy's position as the author of this judgement. Perhaps, then,

Billy's contribution might enable us to gain a sharper sense of the difficulty – and the achievement – of Kirsty's 'we infer that Richard's ... being too nice.' In particular, her use of the first person plural, though it can be construed (merely) as an acknowledgement that she is speaking for Nazrul as well as for herself, marks the beginning of an explicitness about the audience's perspective – and the audience's relationship with Richard.

In her contribution to the feedback, Caroline talks about the isolation of Richard in the Olivier version:

[25:46]

**Caroline:** It's the part where he's saying the speech and he looks like he might be planning to do to kill or capture someone and it looks like he could be in a church or a chapel and it looks like it's a place where not a lot of people go and it looks like there's just been a crowning and everyone's outside and in the picture he looks like he's evil and might be plotting something, and we writ questions as well, um

**Teacher:** go on

**Caroline:** where exactly is he, what is he planning to do, why is he by himself and how did he get in there, who let him in

**Teacher:** excellent, that's, I asked that question as well, I was just asking that question yesterday about why he was by himself, why he was in that ... and why they bring the camera back to show you.

(22 November 2005)

It is not entirely clear whether Caroline intends her questions to have an orientation towards the directorial decisions of setting and camerawork. The very fact, though, that she has problematised the way in which Olivier is framed at this point in the film enables Monica to make explicit that these aspects of the image can be analysed as choices made by the film-maker, and not only as ingredients in the story of Richard. That point was not lost on Foyzur.

Towards the end of this part of the lesson, there is a discussion about the darkness of the stills taken from the 1995 (Loncraine/McKellen) film. Ali and Foyzur start from a position that this aspect of the film is not, in effect, semiotically significant. Ali, confusing the time at which the film is set with the time of its production (and also showing a limited knowledge of cinematic history), suggests that 'they probably never had the cameras that could take pictures of the dark,' while Foyzur offers the mundane explanation, 'probably because it was set in the night.' These ideas are quickly challenged by Billy and Subhan, who propose a much more sophisticated theory:

[33:15]

**Billy:** because it's like dark and there's a dark evil man that says like ...

**Subhan:** I agree with Billy, yeah, but I think it's to show the evilness and, er, the personality of the man and what he's up to and everything ... the darkness is trying to show the evilness.

(22 November 2005)

Their suggestion that the lighting carries a symbolic load convinces Foyzur – and makes him think more about the representation of Richard in both the films he has watched:

[34:44]

**Foyzur:** you know when he's alone, yeah, in the second film we watched, yeah, that's like, and everybody's celebrating outside, that's like representing inside his head what's his view of everything, yeah, and he's saying a really long speech but, like everyone's celebrating outside and you can hear the noise in the background, that's like what's going on in the real world, and you know in the, I think it was the first film, that's like set in the 1930s, and it's kind of dark because they are trying to create like a similar

**Nazrul:** atmosphere

**Foyzur:** a similar way of representing like what he's what he's trying to say.

(22 November 2005)

This is a remarkable contribution. It synthesises what emerged from Caroline's questions about setting and camerawork with Billy and Subhan's understanding of the symbolic significance of lighting. Simultaneously, it reaches back to Lucy's characterisation of the soliloquy in the previous lesson, when she described it as Richard 'saying what's on his mind.'

The argument that I am making, then, in relation to this sequence of lessons, is that there is a history to Foyzur's intervention in the lesson on 1 December: this history is Foyzur's, but it is also a collective history, the history of the class's readings of the multiple texts that constitute their experience of *Richard III*. An adequate account of this reading has to be attentive to the complexity of the social construction of meaning, to the social semiotic work that is being accomplished, to the struggle that is involved in the appropriation and remaking of signs (chapter 2, above).

I would want to emphasise that this work matters – that it constitutes an intellectual accomplishment – and also that it is hard to spot. The work that Foyzur and his peers are engaged in is easy to miss in the hurly-burly of the classroom – and it leaves no monument behind. What counts, though, what merits our attention, is the fleeting, evanescent evidence of dialogic learning.

## Chapter 10

### Reading in a secondary English classroom: agency, interest and multimodal design

In this chapter, I want to continue to interrogate the ways in which reading is conceptualised in policy and to question whether the account that policy provides is adequate as a description of the literacy practices that are to be found in the secondary English classroom.<sup>1</sup> The data at the heart of this chapter are PowerPoint slides produced by two students in Monica's class when they were in Year 8 (at the start of the year or so that I spent with them). The claim that I will make is that these data provide evidence of the productivity of school students, and in particular of their capacity to operate as sophisticated, multimodal sign-makers, using the resources of digital technologies in ways that are not acknowledged within the domain of schooled literacy (Gee 2004; Street 1984, 1995; Street *et al.* 2007).

#### 10.1 Efferent and aesthetic reading in policy and practice

In the English National Curriculum programmes of study that were in force at the time these data were collected (DfEE 1999a), reading was categorised according to two broad kinds of text, literary and non-literary. Each of these categories was then further subdivided, literature into texts belonging to the 'English literary heritage' and 'Texts from different cultures and traditions' (DfEE 1999a: 49), non-literary texts into 'Printed and ICT-based information texts' and 'Media and moving image texts' (DfEE 1999a: 50). Two main purposes of reading were also identified: 'Reading for meaning' and

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this chapter appeared as Yandell (2011).

'Understanding the author's craft' (DfEE 1999a: 49): the latter purpose was defined in ways that imply that what was envisaged was an approach to literary texts; the former would seem to be applicable to all kinds of text (though the relationship between purposes and kinds of text was not made explicit).<sup>2</sup>

The taxonomies that are at work here may well seem commonsensical: they bear a family resemblance to the binaries of fiction and non-fiction which are fundamental to the spatial organisation of (most) libraries and bookshops. They are also closely related to Rosenblatt's well-known distinction between aesthetic and efferent reading orientations:

... the difference between reading a literary work of art and reading for some practical purpose. Our attention is primarily focused on selecting out and analytically abstracting the information or ideas or directions for action that will remain when the reading is over.

(Rosenblatt 1995 [1938]: 32)

And yet, as Carol Fox (2007) has argued in relation to comic books, the binary opposition of efferent and aesthetic reading is simply inadequate to deal with the layered richness of meanings that texts such as Anderson's *King* (2005) or Spiegelman's *Maus* (1987, 1992) have to offer. It may be that the affordances of multimodal texts, and the complexities of contemporary textual practice, pose particular difficulties for the rigid categories of text and reading practice that the National Curriculum presents. On the other hand, it may be that new texts simply reveal more sharply the simultaneous presence of aesthetic and efferent orientations in textual practices across time.

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<sup>2</sup> These taxonomies have survived, more or less unchanged, in the subsequent version of the English National Curriculum (DCSF 2007).



'Reading for meaning' is not always and everywhere neatly separable from aesthetic engagement, and aesthetic engagement may be a means of getting things done.

As part of their work on Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, Monica's class was asked to do some research on other famous assassinations. Pairs of students were given the name of an historical figure who had been assassinated (Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Mahatma and Indira Gandhi, Allende, Anwar Sadat, Leon Trotsky, J.F. Kennedy, Abraham Lincoln, H.F. Verwoerd, John Lennon and Rosa Luxemburg). Using the resources of the school library and of the internet, they were to find out about their allocated figure and share their findings with the rest of the class. The activity ran over three one-hour lessons in May 2005. In the first, the class was taken to the school library, where students were expected to begin their research; in the second, each pair had access to laptop computers in their English classroom, and worked on their presentations; in the third, students presented their findings to the rest of the class. I observed the second of these lessons and interviewed the class teacher, Monica, after the lesson.

This was the students' brief, as outlined on a task guidance sheet:

**Research task**

You are working in a pair. You have been given the name of a person who has been assassinated. You have to find out the following:

- 1) What is (or was this) person famous for?
- 2) Do you know why this person was killed?
- 3) When and where was this person assassinated?
- 4) Three more facts or information you can tell us about this person.

Rules: You must use at least one book *and* the Internet or a CD Rom.  
 You **MUST** write your sources down (the title of the book, the Dewey number and the internet website's correct address.)

The task had been devised a year earlier, by the English teacher who had first planned the scheme of work for *Julius Caesar*. In outlining, for the rest of the department, the aims that would inform the work on the play, she had envisaged this activity as one that would provide an 'opportunity ... for doing background research using both books and the Internet.' The orientation suggested here derives from the National Curriculum programme of study for reading, in particular the section headed 'Printed and ICT-based information texts':

To develop their reading of print and ICT-based information texts, pupils should be taught to:

1. select, compare and synthesise information from different texts
2. evaluate how information is presented
3. sift the relevant from the irrelevant, and distinguish between fact and opinion, bias and objectivity
4. identify the characteristic features, at word, sentence and text level, of different types of texts.

(DfEE 1999a: 50)

This emphasis on information – on texts as repositories of data, and on reading as the identification, ordering and evaluation of these data – is reflected in the way that the students' task is framed through a series of questions: there are facts to be established. The students' work on a Shakespeare play thus provides an opportunity to explore a relevant theme – assassinations – and through this exploration to develop their skill at retrieving, sifting and synthesising the information that books and ICT-based resources have to offer. In its original conception, then, the task reflects and

embodies the categories of reading set forth in the National Curriculum. Embedded within a longer-term engagement with a literary text, the Shakespeare play – where students might be expected to begin to understand a thing or two about ‘the author’s craft’ – the task encourages a different kind of reading: efferent, not aesthetic.

In adopting this task, Monica (the teacher whose class I observed) made only one obvious amendment to it. Whereas, in its original form, students were to demonstrate what they had learned through an oral presentation to the rest of the class, Monica decided that her students would produce PowerPoint presentations – a decision that arose out of her knowledge of the class, of students’ interests and expertise, knowledge that is itself the product of a long-term engagement with the class:

that class in particular has always been very good, they have always had quite a high level of skill, which I’m not sure that all classes have ... and they’ve got a couple of people in there who are REALLY good – Paul and Helen, so if there’s ever a problem we can call on Paul or Helen because they always know, and they share. Last year we did a big advertising project ... and they did Power Point presentations there, and they [the two students] taught them, because they knew things I didn’t know, about how to do slide transitions, about how to add sound, about how to superimpose things – they found images of bottles of drink and they wanted to superimpose their own labels on them, and Helen and Paul could show them how to do this – so they were rushing around the class inducting all the groups ... so they’re all quite good now, so that was really effective I think.

(interview, 12 May 2005)

Already, in Monica’s awareness of what the students brought to the lesson and to their work on assassinations, there is a perspective on teaching and learning that is irreducibly social and dialogic, a perspective that

acknowledges the agency, interests and expertise of the learners. This approach contrasts sharply with the pedagogic assumptions that inform the current version of the English National Curriculum, assumptions that are reflected in the frequency with which the sentence stem, 'pupils should be taught ...', precedes the specification of an area of knowledge. The language of policy, positioning students as passive recipients of education, suggests a transmission model of teaching – what Freire termed the 'banking concept' (Freire 1972).

## 10.2 Making sense of Allende: shaping the material

I want to look at one of the presentations produced by two students, Jo and Paul, who were asked to research the death of Salvador Allende. I am interested in what can be established by an analysis of the two PowerPoint slides that they produced – both what do they know about Allende and what do they know about ICT-based information texts?

Before considering the students' work, I should make it clear that what follows is my interpretation of the sign(s) that they produced. I cannot triangulate this interpretation by adducing in evidence the students' commentary on their work. I do not have access to such data – but I would also want to suggest that my analysis is no less plausible for the absence of such extrinsic correlation. As Kress and Jewitt argue, semiotic work – sign-making – always involves making a selection, based on the interests of the sign-maker, from the material that is available to them:

Given this sense of the sign and its making, we can turn the process around and treat it as a means of 'reading': if the

sign in all its (formal and material) aspects represents the interests of its maker, we can make inferences, hypothetically, from the shape of the sign to the interests of its maker. The sign is evidence of the interests of its maker in the moment of representation, the sign-maker's engagement with the world to be represented. The sign is also evidence of its maker's interests in communication, their engagement with the social world in which the sign is a (part of a) message.

(Kress and Jewitt 2003: 12)

I turn, then, to the students' work, as evidence of their interests and of their learning. Let's start with the words. The first slide, entitled 'Salvador Allende,' contains the following account of his life and death:

Salvador Allende was the president of Chilean 1970 to 1973 and he was a founder of the Chilean socialist party. Salvador Allende died as he was overthrown, he died in a military coup led by general Augusto Pinochet. The nature of his death is unclear: His personal doctor said that he committed suicide with a machine gun given to him by Fidel Castro, while others say that he was murdered by Pinochet's military forces while defending the palace. He was born in Valparaiso. He was a president for three years.

The second slide, entitled 'Assassins of Salvador Allende,' continues thus:

Henry Kissinger and the CIA, directly responsible for his death, and view him as a victim of 'American Imperialism. Members of the political right, however, tend to view Allende much less favourably.

To find out more go to:  
[www.brainyencyclopedia.com](http://www.brainyencyclopedia.com)

The students acknowledge their source, as their briefing notes had instructed them to. In its turn, the website that they reference acknowledges that the article on Allende 'uses material from the Wikipedia article 'Salvador Allende'.' And thus, by consulting the Wikipedia website, it is possible to

reconstruct the editorial processes whereby Jo and Paul produced the text of their presentation.<sup>3</sup>

The article from which they derived their information runs to about 1,800 words; their version, not including headings and the reference to their source, is 122 words long. There is no evidence, I think, that they were synthesising information from more than one source. If they had consulted any library books in their library lesson, there is no trace of this in the work they produced. This is, perhaps, not surprising: web-based material, for their purposes in producing a PowerPoint presentation, is both more accessible and more easily re-worked, re-fashioned, than print-based sources. Moreover, as I hope to show in the analysis that follows, what is involved in the production of such a presentation from web-based material is, in itself, a highly complex activity.

The text on the first page of their slide provides answers to the questions posed on the task guidance sheet (see above). They explain who Allende was, why he was famous, and then they focus on the circumstances of the assassination. Nearly half of the text is copied and pasted from the section of the original article that deals with the coup:

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<sup>3</sup> The website consulted by the students, <[www.brainyencyclopedia.com](http://www.brainyencyclopedia.com)>, republishes almost verbatim the text from the Wikipedia article (<[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Salvador\\_Allende](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Salvador_Allende)>). Wikipedia articles undergo a continual process of collaborative – and contested – amendment. The version that the students consulted would seem closest to the version that was posted on the Wikipedia website at 23:44, 26 September 2004. It can be found in the Wikipedia archive at <[http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Salvador\\_Allende&oldid=6176578](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Salvador_Allende&oldid=6176578)> (accessed 10 May 2007). There is no equivalent archive for the [www.brainyencyclopedia.com](http://www.brainyencyclopedia.com) site.

On September 11, the Chilean military, led by General Augusto Pinochet, staged the Chilean coup of 1973 against Allende. During the capture of the La Moneda Presidential Palace, Allende died. *The nature of his death is unclear: His personal doctor said that he committed suicide with a machine gun given to him by Fidel Castro, while others say that he was murdered by Pinochet's military forces while defending the palace.*

([http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Salvador\\_Allende&oldid=6176578](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Salvador_Allende&oldid=6176578), accessed 10 May 2007)

So is this mere 'copying out' – evidence of the dangers posed by the affordances of new technology, of the too-easy availability of information via the Internet? On the contrary, what Paul and Jo have done is to identify the forty words from their source (italicised in the quotation above) that answer their central research questions. At the very least, then, they have made a selection of what is relevant for their purposes.

More than this, though, has been going on in the construction of Paul and Jo's text, the first part of which is a carefully crafted synthesis of the information on Allende provided by the website. The single error here occurs in the opening sentence, where the adjective 'Chilean' is used in place of the noun, 'Chile.' I can find no evidence that this error was a product of copying text from the source: it may be that the students were confused about the adjectival status of 'Chilean,' or it may be the product of eye-slip from the following line, where the adjective is used correctly in the phrase 'the Chilean socialist party.' In the source, the information about Allende's part in the formation of the Socialist Party is presented, in a subsequent section headed 'Background,' as 'Allende co-founded Chile's socialist party.' The students have combined this with the statement about the dates of Allende's presidency, derived from the introductory section on the website, to produce

a well-formed, fluent and succinct sentence, in which the form of the nominalisation, preceded by an indefinite article – ‘a founder’ – suggests an awareness of the force of the prefix (co-) used in the source:

Salvador Allende was the president of Chilean 1970 to 1973  
and he was a founder of the Chilean socialist party.

From the same (‘Background’) section in their source, the students have copied the information about Allende’s place of birth. What they have done with this, though, is to move it to near the end of the block of text on the first slide, after the sentence that deals with Allende’s death. It is hard not to read this as a deliberate editorial decision, reflecting their sense of the relative unimportance of this fact. What I am proposing, then, is that the material from the website was carefully selected and shaped by the students in ways that reflected their interests. They were exploring Allende as someone who had, like Julius Caesar, been assassinated, and so it is this fact – albeit a disputed fact, as their text acknowledges – which assumes prominence in the version of events that they produce. The order that they have chosen is a journalistic one. They start with the main facts, provide more detail about the most important event, and then, down-page as it were, furnish the reader with a little background.

When we turn to the second of the two slides, however, it might seem that the claims being made for the students’ control over their material become more tendentious. Under the heading ‘Assassins of Salvador Allende,’ the words included in the body of the text are copied verbatim from their source.



Here are the two paragraphs from within which the words were copied, with the students' selection italicised:

Allende is seen as a hero to many on the political left. Some view him as a martyr who died for the cause of socialism. His face has even been stylized and reproduced as a symbol of Marxism, similar to the famous images of Che Guevara. Members of the political left tend to hold the United States, specifically *Henry Kissinger and the CIA, directly responsible for his death, and view him as a victim of 'American Imperialism.'*

*Members of the political right, however, tend to view Allende much less favorably.* His close relationship with Fidel Castro has led many to accuse him of being a communist who was destined to eventually transform Chile into a Castro-style dictatorship. They also argue that the socialist reforms he implemented while in power were the cause of the country's economic woes in 1973.

The students' version, extracting text from the middle of a sentence, pays no attention to the grammar of the original, so that the verb 'view' is left without a subject (originally the 'Members of the political left') and the pronoun 'him' sits uneasily, detached as it is syntactically from the 'Allende' that begins the paragraph in the original. If the first sentence doesn't quite hold together in this reduced form, the second suffers from even more fundamental problems of incoherence. The force of 'however' depends on the binary opposition of political left and right and their different perspectives on Allende. Because 'Henry Kissinger and the CIA' has, in effect, replaced 'Members of the political left' as the subject of the first sentence, the original's balanced presentation of contrary judgements collapses entirely. The violence that Jo and Paul have done to the grammatical coherence and political poise of their source might indicate, then, evidence of the failure of this activity if it is to be construed as a contribution to teaching students to 'sift the relevant from the

irrelevant, and distinguish between fact and opinion, bias and objectivity,' as the National Curriculum has it.

Talking after the lesson in which students were working on their presentations, Monica, the teacher, revealed that Jo and Paul's second slide might have been prompted by her intervention:

... in going round [the class] the things that I'm picking out, that's the key thing I want them to look at - the history that surrounds these individuals, 'so and so is responsible' – but are they really responsible, what other factors and forces lay behind these things – I want them to be aware of those – the whole idea of conspiracies ... in lots and lots of cases it mentions ... I was talking to Jo and Paul about Allende and they said 'He wasn't killed, he died in the coup' and I said 'Look at what it says' and they had found stuff on Henry Kissinger, so I was asking them 'How is Henry Kissinger connected to it?' And that's a big idea for them to grasp, and I don't know what they will come up with tomorrow [when the presentations are made to the rest of the class].

(interview, 12 May 2005)

The students' PowerPoint presentations, however, were not monomodal productions. The words that they used, borrowing and adapting from the article they found on the Internet, constituted one element among many. What I want to do now is to turn to the PowerPoint slides themselves.

### 10.3 Design as evidence of learning

**IMAGES REDACTED DUE TO THIRD PARTY RIGHTS OR OTHER LEGAL ISSUES**



**Figure 10.1**

The first and most striking thing about this is that it has been designed. The affordances of PowerPoint are such, of course, that it would be difficult for the user not to think about design: the software is constructed in such a way that design choices are presented to the user. There are obvious constraints, such as the dimensions of the screen and the fairly prescriptive ways in which the user is encouraged to organise the content. Here, the three elements – title, image and printed text – derive from a stock PowerPoint template, a template that enforces a particular spatial disposition of the three elements. What I want to suggest, though, is that the constraints and affordances of the software (and of this template in particular) have been adapted to serve the interests of the students creating the presentation. (Almost as an aside, I

would also like to venture that the binary of aesthetic and efferent orientations becomes untenable, meaningless even, in the context of the students' multimodal design.)

The website that the students had consulted contains no images, so they found an image of Allende elsewhere on the Internet.<sup>4</sup> What then seems to have happened is that Paul and Jo, with ingenuity and considerable skill, created a background to the slide that is an extrapolation from the design of the image of Allende that they had pasted into the slide. In the image, a photograph of Allende's head and shoulders is superimposed on a background of the Chilean flag, with the flag represented as if hanging from a horizontal pole, so that the left side is red, and in the top right-hand corner is the white star on a deep blue ground, below which falls the white rectangle. The background of the slide picks up the red of the flag, which becomes the dominant colour of the whole slide. The blue of the flag's upper right corner is echoed in the top right-hand corner of the slide, where the red background fades through purple to blue. The white of the flag is echoed in the headline and in the body of the text.

Even if viewed in isolation, the dominant mode of the slide is colour (Kress and van Leeuwen 2001): it carries a weighty semiotic load and it frames, literally and figuratively, both the words and the image. So what does red

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<sup>4</sup> The image of Allende was probably imported from <<http://www.yorku.ca/cerlac/recent03-04.html>>, the website of the Centre for Research on Latin America and the Caribbean, York University, Canada, where it was used to advertise a two-day conference entitled 'CHILE: Civil Democracy in Neoliberal Times' (Friday, November 28 and Saturday, November 29, 2003).

mean here, in this context? Any doubt about this is dispelled by the second slide.

**IMAGES REDACTED DUE TO THIRD PARTY RIGHTS OR OTHER LEGAL ISSUES**



Figure 10.2

The layout of the second slide parallels the first, with the disposition of title, image and written text the same on each. The image of Kissinger<sup>5</sup> may well

<sup>5</sup> The Kissinger image comes from <[www.wtv-zone.com/Mary/NEWWORLDORDER.HTML](http://www.wtv-zone.com/Mary/NEWWORLDORDER.HTML)>, an American Christian website, with quotations from a variety of public figures on the idea of a New World Order. The evidence that this is the source is the file size: the size of the image in the students' PowerPoint is the same as that of the image from this site (224.9 kb). The same image of Kissinger, in different file sizes, is available on a number of different websites, including <[http://www.case.edu/vpdebate/content/programs\\_speakers.htm](http://www.case.edu/vpdebate/content/programs_speakers.htm)> and <[www.guesswhosthejew.com/Henry\\_Kissinger.html](http://www.guesswhosthejew.com/Henry_Kissinger.html)>. Versions of the same image, differently cropped, are available at <[http://www.cooperativeresearch.org/entity.jsp?entity=9/11\\_commission](http://www.cooperativeresearch.org/entity.jsp?entity=9/11_commission)> and at <[www.topsynergy.com/famous/Henry\\_Kissinger.asp](http://www.topsynergy.com/famous/Henry_Kissinger.asp)>.

have been chosen because it, too, mirrors the image of Allende. Both men are presented with their bespectacled faces and their besuited torsos angled very slightly to the left of the viewer. One again, though, the dominant mode is colour, and the most prominent sign on the slide is blue. The sentence grammar of the writing on the second slide may be unclear, confused and incoherent; the grammatical organisation of the two slides as a single multimodal text is exemplary in its coherence. Central to the students' design is the opposition of red and blue, signifying political affiliations and orientations. (There might also be a subsidiary meaning in the sequence of the slides, which represents a chronological movement: the triumph of the blue forces is thus prefigured in the blue corner of the first slide, its placing on the right an indication, within Western reading conventions, of futurity [Kress and van Leeuwen 1996].)

I want to return now to the issue of the grammatical coherence of the writing on the second slide. In my earlier analysis, I treated it as a piece of continuous discursive prose – as if it were the same kind of text as the source from which it was derived. I am not at all sure that these assumptions are warranted. The words are the same, but they have been differently framed.

The Internet website where the words originated presents information much as it might be presented in a print-medium encyclopaedia: perhaps the only significant difference is that the use of hyperlinks allows the reader to navigate between entries with greater facility. The article on Allende starts with a short summary, which is followed by a number of sections, organised

more or less chronologically, each of which provides more detail on aspects of Allende's life and times; it then concludes with a list of references. Despite the complicating presence of hyperlinks, then, the organisation of the article is predominantly linear and temporal.

In contrast, the students' PowerPoint presentation is organised spatially.

Within each slide, the different elements stand in apposition to each other:

that is the meaning of their presence on the same slide. Thus, on the first

slide, Allende is represented by the title, the image and the written text – and

also by the red background that infuses all the separate blocks of semiotically

significant material. On the second slide, the same set of relationships exists.

The presence of the image of Kissinger identifies him as one of the

'Assassins of Salvador Allende,' as the title has it. What, then, of the

written text on this slide? In PowerPoint, written text tends to be organised

not in continuous prose but in bullet points, with each bullet point standing in

parallel to the others on the same slide: the internal organisation of writing

thus mirrors in detail the appositional relationships of the larger blocks of

semiotic material within a single slide. If we apply these organising principles

to the words that Jo and Paul pasted into the text box on their second slide,

the issue of their (in)coherence begins to look rather different. What they

have done is to identify two categories of people who can be labelled as

'Assassins of Salvador Allende':

- *Henry Kissinger and the CIA, and*
- *Members of the political right.*

What looked like carelessness or a lack of understanding of the sentence

grammar and textual coherence of the source might better be understood as

motivated selection of appropriate material. There is an additional piece of evidence that suggests that what the students did was to choose two sections from the article, and that is the absence of the inverted commas after 'imperialism.' The most plausible explanation for this omission is that the text was imported in two sections, each section standing in an appositional relationship to the title: in the blue corner we have these forces, as it were.

One of my starting points for the analysis of the students' work was the question of what it reveals about their knowledge of ICT-based information texts. What the analysis suggests is the inadequacy of the way such knowledge is framed within the discursive world of policy. Within the version of the English National Curriculum that had statutory force at the time, the separation of 'Printed and ICT-based information texts' from 'Media and moving image texts' seems, at best, somewhat arbitrary, and carries with it the implication that questions of design can somehow be relegated to a special category of text, safely insulated from the business of retrieving, sifting and synthesising information from the written (printed) word. In more recent revisions to the National Curriculum, there is the suggestion that 'Pupils should be able to ... understand how meaning is created through the combination of words, images and sounds in multi-modal texts' (QCDA 2008). Even here, though, it is only when school students are positioned as readers that multimodality is mentioned. As far as the productive capacity of school students is concerned, there is nothing more adventurous than the injunction that they should be able to 'present material clearly, using appropriate layout, illustrations and organisation': what the gloss on this



reveals is that what is envisaged is that this 'could include headings, subheadings, bullet points, captions, font style and size, and the use of bold or italics when presenting work on screen' (*ibid.*). For students as writers, then, all that the new technologies can provide is scope for some presentational embellishment, typographical aids to ensure that the meaning of the words gets through.

The problem with this is, firstly, that it does not begin to describe what Jo and Paul know about ICT-based texts, and, secondly, that the perspective of policy encourages the kind of misreading of students' work that was exemplified by my initial (monomodal) approach to what Jo and Paul had produced. The meaning of their PowerPoint presentation does not reside in the words, with the images and the background supplying a little decorative curlicue or two: it resides in the multimodal ensemble, in the totality of the presentation. The meaning of any element within this design is relational and contingent, no more reducible to its parts than any other complex text – *Julius Caesar*, say.

(Mention of the Shakespeare play prompts me to raise a further layer of complexity involved in the PowerPoint presentation, to which I have not attended at all. I have treated the two slides as if they were the presentation, as if the students' semiotic work was all on screen, rather in the manner of those Shakespearean critics who treat the script as if it were the play itself, as if performance were merely the shadows in Plato's cave. I have little choice in the matter: I did not observe the subsequent lesson, and have no data on the

presentation that Jo and Paul gave to the rest of their class. But I must at least register my awareness of this lack. The affordances of PowerPoint consist of the means whereby the software encourages and constrains the disposition of elements on the screen, but also involve the ways in which it functions as a mediational tool, as something between a script and an aide memoire as well as a backdrop to the live presentation. How did Paul and Jo present their research? Where and how did they stand? What did they say? And how did the audience of their peers respond? I don't know.)

#### 10.4 Allende and *Julius Caesar*: reading the word and the world

Consideration of the meaning of the students' PowerPoint presentation takes me back to the other question with which I started: what do they know about Allende? One way of answering this question would be to look at the content of the first of their two slides, to identify the pieces of information that Jo and Paul have extracted from their source. They know, too, that there is a debate about whether Allende was assassinated: this is clear from the words that they have included to describe the different interpretations of the circumstances of Allende's death – words that gesture at the controversy that has rumbled on for years within the Wikipedia site, as well as more widely. They have learned, with specific reference to Allende's death, something of the difficulty of distinguishing, as the National Curriculum demands, 'between fact and opinion, bias and objectivity.'

But the second slide reflects a different kind of learning. As I have suggested above, its creation would seem to owe something to the teacher's

intervention, her suggestion that Jo and Paul should go on thinking about what the website had to say about the role of Henry Kissinger, among others. The intellectual step that she encouraged them to take, to move from a conception of assassination as bounded by the immediate physical circumstances of the death (did Allende shoot himself or was he shot by Pinochet's troops?) to a broader, more contextualized and more political understanding, is, as Monica acknowledges, a big one. And it is possible to construe linguistic features of the second slide as evidence that the students are operating at the limits of their conceptual reach. The collapse of sentence structure might indicate this; so might the heading that they have used. 'Assassimators' is an intriguing choice. Is it that neither Jo nor Paul had come across 'assassin'? This seems unlikely, partly because the word has currency within the lexis of video gaming: for example, *Hitman 2: Silent Assassin* is a popular game, available on a variety of platforms (and first released in October 2002). It might be more plausible, then, to speculate that the students did not quite connect the word 'assassin' with Allende's assassination and the way that Monica was inviting them to think about wider issues of agency, power and responsibility. The students' solution is to coin a new word – and it is an apt coinage. Effectively a back-derivation from 'assassination,' its Latin suffix suggests power and impersonality (a bit like Terminator). If the assassin is the individual who fires the bullet, the assassinator is the one whose word makes the death happen.

What makes this interpretation of the heading as the product of motivated decisions by the students rather less fanciful is the fact that the heading

exists, and means, within the multimodal semiotic ensemble of the slide presentation as a whole. For what the second slide, with its carefully constructed mirror image of the first, does is to move the students' presentation of Allende beyond the death in the Presidential Palace of La Moneda and out into the arena of world politics.

This shift has implications for more than the focus of the students' research project. As it had been conceived by the teacher within the English department who had originally devised the scheme of work for *Julius Caesar*, the opportunity for students to find out about other assassinations was tangential to the exploration of Shakespeare's play. The activity, thematically linked to the play, involved a different kind of text – information, not literary – and different kinds of reading: reading that was oriented towards the retrieval of specific bits of information. In its original conception, then, the activity did not disturb the taxonomies of the National Curriculum. Monica's approach to the activity is significantly different:

... that's the key thing I want them to look at - the history that surrounds these individuals, 'so and so is responsible' – but are they really responsible, what other factors and forces lay behind these things.

(interview, 12 May 2005)

The presentation on Allende that Jo and Paul produce demonstrates their understanding that the events of 1973 can be differently framed, differently interpreted. This conceptual development has huge implications for their understanding of *Julius Caesar*. More than this, though, it opens the possibility that their reading of *Julius Caesar* will inform and be informed by their understanding of the world. The questions that Monica poses here bring

the research project and the study of *Julius Caesar* into a different alignment. The distinction between literary and information text becomes much less important, since both kinds of text become tools for thinking with. This conception of the text, and hence of what reading is for, is central to Monica's pedagogy

It is, perhaps, worth making the point that the presentation is a collaborative production: it is the work of Jo-and-Paul, as it were. It is not just that we have no means of assigning particular contributions to either individual student, but also that to attempt to do so would be in some sense to miss the point of the activity. The PowerPoint is, in a very specific sense, a sign that is 'a construct between socially organized persons in the process of their interaction' (Vološinov 1929/1986: 21, quoted in chapter 2, above). What I have sought to demonstrate in this chapter is a particular instance of the process whereby the two students make the words of a website their own, populating them with their own intentions (Bakhtin 1975/1981:293, see chapter 2). And the semiotic work that the students do is both powerful evidence of their cognitive development – their learning – and, simultaneously, the means by which this learning is accomplished.

## Chapter 11

### Mind the gap: investigating test literacy and classroom literacy

In chapter 3, I quoted George W. Bush on the importance of literacy: ‘You teach a child to read, and he or her will be able to pass a literacy test’ (*Times Educational Supplement*, 24 August, 2001). As I suggested in chapter 3, there are significant points of correspondence between George Bush’s model — that learning to read is important because one is thereby enabled to pass a literacy test — and the neck-verse literacy that saved the lives of (some) functionally literate felons. Neck-verse literacy shares three key features with George Bush’s literacy: it assumes a simple binary opposition of literacy and illiteracy (pass/fail or hanged/not hanged); it can easily be tested; it is the property of the individual (Bush’s ‘he or her’). Modern literacy tests, of course, are more sophisticated, the assessments more finely calibrated, the outcomes more nuanced; but the underlying assumptions about literacy have more in common with the neck verse than might be imagined.

#### 11.1 Test literacy: the case of *Richard III*

I want to explore in some detail one such test, the 2006 Key Stage 3 English examination paper on Shakespeare’s *Richard III* (QCA 2006a).<sup>1</sup> I will look at how reading and the reader are constructed by the test, before considering one candidate’s response to the paper. Using evidence provided by classroom observation of the same student and by his writing outside the

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this chapter appeared as Yandell (2008a).

exam, I will compare his performance in the test with his reading of *Richard III* in the classroom. What emerges from this comparison is not, however, a story of differential performance in the same kind of literacy so much as a recognition of the chasm that separates test literacy from the literacy practices of the urban English classroom, the literacy practices that have been described in the preceding chapters. Jane Coles has argued persuasively that the effect of 'the system of national tests [with] Shakespeare at their heart ... will be to support and uphold hegemonic practices' (Coles 2004: 57). While I agree with this analysis of the impact of such tests, what my research data suggest is the continuing possibility of counter-hegemonic practices, the continuing 'opportunities to create classrooms where new forms of cultural discourse can be opened up and explored' (Coles 2004: 57).

As part of the assessment regime designed to ensure the accountability of the education service and intended to raise standards, almost all fourteen-year-olds within the English state education sector sat an examination paper on Shakespeare.<sup>2</sup> The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, the government body with responsibility for overseeing the National Curriculum and its assessment at the time, selected three plays from within the canon: in 2006, *Richard III* was, for the first time, one of the three. Within the examination, candidates were presented with two extracts from the play. They had forty-five minutes to answer a question. As the cover to the examination paper explained, 'This booklet contains one task which assesses

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<sup>2</sup> The key stage 3 tests were abandoned in late 2008, after a spectacularly mismanaged management of the marking of the papers earlier that year (see, for example <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/7669254.stm>).

your reading and understanding of *Richard III* (QCA 2006a: 1). Where, one might wonder, did reading end and understanding begin? Were reading and understanding envisaged as separate activities? Where and when did they take place – in the classroom, over time, or in the examination hall?

There was, nonetheless, a clear commitment to a model of literacy that went beyond the recitation of the neck verse. The inside cover presented candidates with the task:

**Richard III**

Act 1 Scene 1, lines 32 to 96

Act 3 Scene 7, lines 110 to 172

In these extracts, how does Richard use language to deceive others and to hide his plans to become king?

*Support your ideas by referring to both of the extracts which are printed on the following pages.*

(QCA 2006a)

The claim on the front cover is that the task would assess the candidate's 'reading and understanding of *Richard III*' – that is, the whole play – but what the task insists on, twice, is a focus on two extracts from the play. At best, then, an assumption is made that candidates' 'reading and understanding' of a part of the play will be an accurate proxy indicator of their 'reading and understanding' of the whole.

In reality, though, because the scenes which were to be the focus of the examination question were published in advance, many candidates had an entirely different reading experience of the 'SATs scenes,' as they were known, than they had of the rest the play. In many of the schools where I visited my PGCE students, school students were presented with photocopies of the SATs scenes, and no other part of the play. At worst, their preparation for the exam consisted solely of exercises relating to the set scenes,



exercises that were designed to enable the candidate to regurgitate the required gobbets in response to the examination question (see also Barker 2003, Coles 2003). The version of literacy that was being promulgated in such contexts bears a striking resemblance to neck-verse literacy.

According to the italicised rubric, the candidate was meant to have 'ideas' – though, to be sure, ones that were rooted in, and hence might have been adequately supported by, the extracts. This might suggest scope for personal response, as outlined in the National Curriculum attainment targets for reading:

Level 7

Pupils show understanding of the ways in which meaning and information are conveyed in a range of texts. *They articulate personal and critical responses to poems, plays and novels, showing awareness of their thematic, structural and linguistic features.*

(DfEE 1999c: 5; my emphases)

The concept of personal response has a long history, with roots in the Wordsworthian tradition explored in chapter 3 and also in I.A. Richards' *Practical Criticism* (1929) as much as in reader-response criticism (Rosenblatt, 1938, 1978), and it is a concept that, given the nexus of power relationships that shape all encounters between students and canonical texts, has tended to promise more liberality, more openness, than it has delivered. If this is the case in all contexts where texts and readers meet, the scope for personal response in the (literature) examination room is far more circumscribed. As Tony Davies observed in relation to literature examinations in higher education more than a quarter of a century ago:

The required 'discussion', seemingly no more than an extension in writing of the friendly open-ended dialogue of the tutorial, is in fact a monologue in which the student, to 'cover the question', is obliged both to reply 'in his or her own words' and to assume the position ('we find ...') of the absent but watchful questioner. Given the complex intertextualities that have gone to produce a student's 'own words', the writing of a simple examination essay becomes a feat of multiple and simultaneous impersonation beside which *The Waste Land* looks like the performance of an amateur impressionist.

(Davies 1982: 39)

As Davies also notes, 'most examination questions are in fact assertions or commands' (*ibid.*).

The question on the *Richard III* paper enforces a series of assumptions about the play and about the candidates' reading(s) of the play. It asserts that 'Richard use[s] language to deceive others and to hide his plans to become king.' The student's task, then, is merely to explain *how* this happens. The play arrives pre-packaged, the task of understanding what is enacted already accomplished by the examiner. The student is invited to focus on a single character, but even here most of the interpretive work has already been done. Richard is presented as both knowable and known: his motives, his intentions, his ambitions and his methods are all presented as facts. All that remains for the student is to explore language as one of the methods that the character, so we are informed, uses. The focus on language here may be linked to the emphasis on 'understanding the author's craft' in the National Curriculum (DfEE 1999a: 49) and in the Literacy Strategy (DfEE 2001b). If so, what is really quite bizarre is that the question transfers attention from the author's craft to the *character's*. Richard, rather than being seen as a product of the author, a character created, at least in part, through and in language,

has somehow become an autonomous user of language. There is, thus, no room in the exam question for interrogating the conception of 'dramatic characters as recognizably 'real' people, where ... characters are not an effect of text but autonomous entities' (Shepherd 1991: 91); no room, either, for a recognition that even the issue of Richard's name is problematic (in the early quarto editions, he appears as 'Gloster'; see also Cloud 1991).

The test is, thus, predicated on the assumption that the student's 'reading and understanding' of the play can be assessed through a task that concentrates on two short extracts from the script, that treats character as stable, unproblematic and known, and that treats the language of these extracts as the property of the character, the means whereby the character achieves planned goals (deceiving others and hiding his plans to become king).

On the remaining pages of the test booklet are printed the two extracts, each of which is prefaced by a piece of explanatory text, contained within a shaded box. The first extract is introduced thus:

In this extract, Richard tells the audience his plans. He then talks to his brother, Clarence, who is being taken by Brakenbury to be imprisoned in the Tower.

(QCA 2006a: 3)

The candidate who reads this is entitled to feel somewhat confused. The task question asserts that 'Richard use[s] language to deceive others and to hide his plans', yet the very next page announces that 'Richard tells the audience his plans.' Perhaps one is meant to infer that the audience is not included in the 'others' to whom the question refers. If so, this is not made explicit;

moreover, such an inference seems to imply that what Richard says to the audience provides transparent access to his soul. It is hard to maintain this, though, when the speaker reveals that he is 'subtle, false and treacherous.' Richard's opening soliloquy, the last part of which is included in the extract, sets up a relationship with the audience which does not seem to be characterised by simple plain-dealing. It begins with a statement that simultaneously locates the historical moment (after the battle of Tewkesbury) and announces the speaker's allegiance to the victorious faction: 'Now is the winter of our discontent/Made glorious summer by this son of York.' Or does it? The first line, seeming to be a semantically and syntactically complete statement, misleads the audience: what it means is utterly transformed by the introduction of the (unexpected) main verb at the start of the second line: the season that is 'now' is not winter but summer, brought on by the sun/son of York. The surface meaning, then, is sunny enough. But the reason that the first line of the play is often quoted in isolation is not through ignorance of the second line: it is because the first line allows Richard to reveal his (present) discontent before swiftly concealing it behind the punning mask, the correction offered by the second line. So language is both showing and hiding, and Richard is both telling the truth and lying. Even in his soliloquies – especially in his soliloquies – transparency is not on offer. He is as playful (and as unreliable) as his theatrical ancestor, the Vice of the morality plays. (And here I, too, am entering into the spirit of the exam paper, playing the literary critical game, offering up an interpretation of Richard, a dash of close reading with just a hint of theatrical-historical context. But my words are not an exam rubric: you, dear reader, can reject my reading, or refine it, as you

see fit.) What I am suggesting, however, is that, even within the discursive confines of traditional literary criticism, the examination task is constructed of so crass a series of oversimplifications as to encourage an utterly banal (mis)reading of the text.

The contradiction between the task question and the introduction to the first extract is troubling for a much more fundamental reason than its oversimplification of Richard's character. As I have indicated above, the easiest way of resolving this contradiction is to assume that the question is directing the candidate to consider only the ways in which Richard uses language in relation to other 'characters' within the play. So it is not just that Richard, for the purposes of this examination, is to be treated less as a character in a play and more as a (real) person; it is that the kind of play that *Richard III* is has been redefined by the exam paper. To encourage students to write about Richard's use of language while ignoring the ways in which the actor playing Richard uses language to develop a relationship with the audience is to transform the Renaissance drama into a different kind of theatrical animal altogether – less Shakespeare than Shaw, maybe. It puts the play behind a proscenium arch – and it does so because this is the only way that Richard can become domesticated, turned into a realist character, and the whole edgy business of his tricky, unreliable, mediating relationship with the audience ignored.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> This is, of course, the relationship that was explored by Foyzur and his peers in chapter 9 (above).

Matters don't become much more straightforward when we reach the second extract. Its explanatory gloss informs us that:

In this extract, Buckingham and Richard carry out their plan to trick the Mayor into believing that Richard deserves to be king. The Mayor and citizens are on the stage watching and listening.

(QCA 2006a: 5)

Again, one might want to ask, what about the other audience? How does this audience-on-stage alter the way that the wider audience reads what is being enacted? The mention of the stage is, nonetheless, the most explicit acknowledgement in the examination paper that *Richard III* is a play. The problem is that this gesture sits uneasily, particularly in this scene, with the instruction to focus on language. Words, in *Richard III*, are part of embodied action. Richard's act, here, does not start when he opens his mouth; it starts when he appears:

*Enter RICHARD aloft, between two Bishops*  
 Mayor. See where his Grace stands, 'tween two clergymen;  
 Buck. Two props of virtue for a Christian Prince,  
     To stay him from the fall of vanity;  
     And see, a book of prayer in his hand.  
(Shakespeare 1981: III.vii.93ff)

The decision not to start the extract from this point but from fifteen lines later in the scene would seem perverse if the intention were to enable students to write about Richard's performance, about the act that he and Buckingham put on for the benefit of the Mayor and citizens. The scene has been stage-managed: where Richard stands (between two bishops) and the prop he holds (the prayerbook) are as much a part of the designed effect as are the words he speaks. When, a few lines into the extract, Richard asks 'Else wherefore breathe I in a Christian land?' the impact of the rhetorical question

depends on the iconography of his appearance. The insistence of the examination paper that students write about Richard's use of language amounts to a denial of the multimodal semiotic resources of drama. There is a kind of absurd Platonism at work here. Examiners tend to complain grumpily about candidates who write about Shakespeare plays as if they were films – about *Romeo and Juliet* as if Tybalt shot Mercutio on Verona Beach and the lovers' eyes met across a crowded fishtank, and so on. But at least such candidates approach the plays as drama, as texts instantiated in performance. Might this not be preferable to an approach that neglects entirely the materiality of the drama?

Those responsible for the examination paper are quite explicit about their approach to task-setting:

The reading task on the Shakespeare paper is a test of prepared reading via a single task. It tests the same set of skills as are assessed on the unseen texts on the Reading paper. The emphasis is on pupils' ability to orchestrate those skills and demonstrate their understanding of, and response to, the Shakespeare text they have studied, and so the assessment focuses are not separately identified.

Each task targets one of the following areas related to the study of a Shakespeare play:

- character and motivation;
- ideas, themes and issues;
- the language of the text;
- the text in performance.

In 2006, the areas targeted for assessment are:

*Macbeth* character and motivation;

*Much Ado About Nothing* ideas, themes and issues;

*Richard III* the language of the text.

(QCA 2006b: 29).

The assumption, then, is that it is both possible and desirable to target separate areas for assessment – that to set a single task on the play will

enable all candidates to demonstrate 'their understanding of, and response to, the Shakespeare text they have studied.' There is, I think, a further assumption in the use of the word 'text' here. It is that the object of study is, in effect, the words on the page. The script is seen as primary, its instantiation in performance as merely secondary. The 'text in performance' thus becomes one of four possible areas of assessment – the one area that was not assessed in any of the tasks set in 2006. Shouldn't all students be encouraged – expected, even – to make sense of any Shakespeare play primarily as a text in performance?

I want to turn now to consider how the examination question was answered by one candidate. This is what Billy wrote:

In the opening Richard mention how he going to set his two brothers Clarence and King Edward in deadly hate one against the other. But then Clarence enters guarded by Brakenbry, soon to be sent to the tower. When then Richard ask the question 'Brother good day what means this armed gard that waits upon your grace' when he knows why those guard are there and where his going to. Richard know this because Clarence was not the one that was going to kill the king. It was Richard York or GLOUCESTER.

In Act 3 scene 7 Buckingham say to Richard that you should take the trone that It in his blood to becom King But Richard dicives [deceives] the mayor by re[fu]sing and it is his fault. This makes the mayor think that Richard shold have the throne and Richard being King will not bee a bad thing but a good thing

The script was awarded two out of a possible eighteen marks. This placed it in the middle of the lowest band, which the published mark scheme characterises in this way:

A few simple facts and opinions about what Richard says or does in these extracts, eg in the first, *he tells lies*, and in the



second, *he is acting*, though some misunderstanding may be evident. Parts of the extracts are retold or copied and answers may be only partly relevant.

(QCA 2006b: 56)

It is not my intention here to mount a defence of Billy's examination script. It may well be that the marker was correct to judge his answer as a Band 1 response. What is it, though, about Billy's answer that is deficient? Is it his reading and understanding of the play? Or is it his ability to write a literary critical essay in examination conditions? When, for example, he quotes Richard's faux-naïf question to Clarence, he is doing considerably more than mentioning a 'few simple facts about what Richard says or does'; but what he cannot yet do is to achieve a level of explicitness about what is going on in this exchange. Likewise, when he capitalises 'Gloucester' in the final sentence of his first paragraph, he is, I think, attempting to draw attention to the layers of irony in the trap that Richard has set: King Edward, as both Richard and the audience know, is imprisoning the wrong 'G.' But the way that Billy has attempted to communicate this – through typography – will not do in an essay where the expectation is that knowledge will be rendered explicit in well-formed sentences. He both knows a great deal more than he says, and also has problems finding an appropriate way of saying what he knows within the discursive constraints of the examination essay.

### 11.2 Classroom literacy: Billy's reading of Shakespeare

I make these claims partly on the internal evidence of Billy's examination essay, but chiefly on the basis of what I observed of Billy in the year preceding his *Richard III* exam. Billy was a student at Wharfside School, in Monica's Year 9 class. I want to move on now to some of the data collected

during the year leading up to the SATs exams. Using these data, I want to make two linked but nonetheless separable arguments: first, that what Billy wrote in his exam essay cannot be taken as an accurate gauge of his 'understanding of, and response to, the Shakespeare text [he had]studied,' as was proposed in the QCA's *English test mark scheme* (QCA 2006b); second, that an adequate account of Billy's reading and understanding of the play must attend to the different literacy practices of the urban English classroom, where he and his peers had explored (and enjoyed) *Richard III*.

In January 2006, as Billy's class was nearing the end of their work on the play, students were asked to write a series of entries in Richard's diary. The assignment was intended to provide students with the opportunity to reflect on the main events of the play and on how these events might be represented in Richard's consciousness. Billy made the decision to word-process his 'Richard III Diary,' as he called it, choosing a font that looked more like cursive handwriting. His second entry covers the wooing of Anne:

**Dear Diary**

Arr I love you I feel so sorry for you blah de blah de blah, whatever. At last my persuasive words have got Anne in the deep palms of my hands. I feel great everything is going just as I planned. Will I keep her? ... For the moment I will because she helps me become more powerful more powerful than I fought.

What Billy wrote in his exam essay might have appeared to be not much more than narrative, a not very skilful retelling of what happens in the extracts; what Billy writes here reveals much more of his reading of the play. He understands that the simple dichotomy of war and peace, battle and courtship, which Richard presented in the soliloquy with which the play

begins, is an illusion: both offer paths to power. He remembers the cool cynicism of Richard's 'I will have her but I will not keep her long,' echoed here in his question, 'Will I keep her?' He has a sense of Richard's ability to manipulate others, largely through his 'persuasive words.' And the diary form enables Billy to communicate something of Richard's self-awareness, his relishing of his own bravura performance. But it is the first sentence of this entry that I find compelling. Billy's use of direct speech, as his Richard records his wooing voice, dissolves in the mockery of 'blah de blah de blah, whatever.' The effect, the jolting, shocking transition in mid-sentence, mirrors Richard's 'Was ever woman in this humour woo'd?/Was ever woman in this humour won?' (I.ii.233-4): as soon as Anne has left the stage, he steps outside his role as lover, revelling in his power, inviting the audience to join him in admiring his performance and in the calculating misogyny of his attitude to Anne.

Behind the words of Billy's diary entry lies a history of his – and his class's – engagement with this moment in the play. Two months earlier, as preparation for their first reading of the scene between Richard and Anne (Act 1, scene 2), students were asked to participate in group improvisations. The activity, involving rehearsal time and group presentations, occupied the final twenty minutes or so of the lesson. I have described the activity in some detail in chapter 8, above. As break-time neared, Billy volunteered, with a little prompting from Jo, to perform a second improvisation:

[53:38]

**Jo:** Billy, come on, do your other one then

**Billy:** Come on, then. We need some glue, or sellotape

**Teacher:** No, no, I think that sounds too complicated

**Kemi:** It's about drugs, it's about drugs

[Billy is already moving around the room, as is Jo, who is moving chairs to establish the set. Billy is using a piece of file paper to construct a gigantic spliff as he moves]

**Billy:** it's about persuading someone to take it ... miss, we got blu-tak

**Teacher:** OK. Come on then hurry up

[Lucy gets out of her seat and joins Billy]

**Teacher:** We've only got four minutes and I'm on duty and we have to put the tables back

**Billy** [throwing the spliff to Lucy]: You can persuade me to

[Billy and Lucy take up their positions, sitting at right angles to one another, Lucy holding the spliff]

?**Ali:** 3, 2, 1

**Teacher:** Go!

**Lucy** [thrusting the spliff towards Billy]: You wanna take it

**Billy:** Nah, nah, look, no

**Lucy:** Just take it

**Billy:** No

**Lucy:** It's not gonna kill you, just take it

**Billy:** No, man

**Lucy:** Take it

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**Figure 11.1**

54:24, 22 November 2005

**Billy:** What, what will my par–

**Lucy:** Your parents!

**Billy:** What would they think if–

**Lucy:** Your parents are on holiday

[As the conversation continues, Lucy turns to face Billy more directly. Her eye contact is hard to evade.]

**Billy:** Yeah ...

**Lucy:** They're in another country, just take it

[Billy shakes his head]

**Lucy:** Take it

[Billy shakes his head, but his hand is reaching out towards the spliff]

**Lucy:** Now!

[Billy takes the spliff]

**Billy:** If I pass out or something ..

**Lucy** [turns her head away, rolling her eyes upwards]: I'll run you to the hospital, la la la, whatever. Just take it.

[Billy draws on the spliff, coughs, stands up]

**Billy:** Man, that shit's strong!

[General laughter]

(22 November 2005)

There is an unmistakeable playfulness about this moment. It is the end of the lesson, and the teacher allows the students to push boundaries. The focus of the improvisation – the consumption of illegal substances – is not the usual stuff of school learning; Billy and Lucy have grabbed the attention of their audience before they even begin, and they maintain it thereafter. At best, though, this belongs in a box labelled citizenship, or personal, social and health education, doesn't it? What does it have to do with Shakespeare?

At the risk of stating the obvious, there is a fair amount of playfulness about *Richard III*, too. By this I mean more than the fact – largely ignored in the examination paper which confronted Billy later in the year – that it is a play, that language is embodied in action, that actors take on roles; I also want to draw attention to Richard's playfulness, to the way in which he adopts roles – the soldier, the lover, the reluctant king, the victim of disability – and presents these roles to us, the audience, demanding that we admire him for his skill as a performer and for the power of his performance, that is, for the power that is both demonstrated in and created through the performance. Like the Cat in the Hat (and the mediaeval Vice), Richard is constantly saying:

Look at me!

Look at me!

Look at me NOW!  
It is fun to have fun  
But you have to know how.

(Seuss 1957: 18)

Billy and Lucy are having fun, too. What licenses their improvisation is not merely the indulgence of the teacher at the end of the lesson but the fact of the role play, the fact that they are thus enabled to play with other identities, to experience the power and the pleasure of being someone else. At the same time, they are learning about persuasion. They have understood, too, that the teacher's instruction to 'do it with words' meant simply that physical coercion is not allowed: Lucy's performance is one in which she draws on resources of language but also, simultaneously, on gesture, gaze, posture. What she achieves with language, too, is not merely through the words she chooses but also through tone and inflection. Thus, for example, she crushes Billy's final objection ('If I pass out or something ...') with the withering, casual superiority of 'I'll run you to the hospital, la la la, whatever.' It seems plausible to me that two months later, when Billy was thinking how to represent in diary form Richard's seduction of Anne, he was able to draw on Lucy's line to help him shape the sneering, searing mockery of 'I love you I feel so sorry for you blah de blah de blah, whatever.'

Test literacy, as George Bush acknowledged, is justified in functional terms. Quite different claims can be made for the literacy practices outlined above – claims that, I think, are central to the justification for English as a school subject. The act of improvisation, like the literary text they are reading, enables students to imagine and inhabit other possible selves, other possible worlds. Billy, Lucy and their peers are exploiting the doubleness of the fictive,

of play, where simultaneously things are and are not, to engage in the serious work of cultural making, work that is semiotically rich and ethically important.

But did the improvisation help Billy to read (and understand) *Richard III*? The problem with the question is that it might depend on what one meant by reading, how one thought that understanding might be demonstrated, and what one understood by '*Richard III*.' The testing regime assumes that *Richard III* is, in essence, language-as-print, the words on the page; it treats performance as accidental. Moreover, it assumes that a student's reading (and understanding) can be assessed on the basis of the student's ability to produce a particular kind of written text. The good reader, the one who would be awarded full marks, would produce a piece of writing that looked like this:

Coherent analysis of how Richard deceives others and hides his plans to become king, eg in the first extract, to make himself appear innocent, almost naïve, he pretends to really believe the king is having Clarence imprisoned because his name is George, and in the second, Richard gives the impression that being king would be a great hardship by using words like 'impose' and 'yoke'. Appreciation of the effects of features of language, eg in the first extract, he is sarcastic when he describes the Queen as 'fair, and not jealous' as previously he had said the opposite, and in the second, Richard plays with words when he says 'I do suspect I have done some offence', because the audience are fully aware of his real offences, but he knows the mayor isn't and is going to offer him the throne. Comments and precisely selected references to the text integrated into well-developed argument.

(QCA 2006b: 56)

The description of a band 6 answer certainly looks very different from the exam paper handed in by Billy. And there are – as indicated in this descriptor – things that Billy needs to learn about forms of discursive writing if he is to prosper within the education system, if he is to acquire the capital of

qualifications. But to admit that what Billy lacks is skill in producing in writing 'coherent analysis' and 'well-developed argument' is not at all the same as to concede that it is his *reading* that is deficient, nor that he has failed to grasp the *ideas* that are outlined above.

Whereas reading and writing in the examination are resolutely individual and monomodal pursuits, in Monica's classroom texts are explored collectively, over time, in and through an ensemble of multimodal resources. Something of this has already been suggested by the glimpse into the class's involvement in the production of improvised scenarii. Students talked about, analysed and annotated still images derived from a wide range of productions of the play; they watched, discussed and compared two film versions, starring Olivier (1955) and McKellen (1995); they recapped and predicted and argued and questioned; they read the script – and they talked about it. Their experience of reading *Richard III* involved the reading of still and moving images, DVDs and the Cambridge School Shakespeare edition of the play, unrehearsed readings and rehearsed improvisations.

Here they are, a little over a week after the lesson in which they had improvised the role plays, reading Act 1, scene 2. Anne's long opening speech is read by Jenny, and then Monica interrupts:

[40:31]

**Teacher:** OK, who's she cursing? She's cursing several people – hands up .. Billy

**Billy:** {Richard

**Kemi:** {his wife

**Teacher:** yes, why is she cursing him?

**Billy:** because he's the one that killed him her husband



**Teacher:** right, good, so she starts off by cursing Richard, then who else does she curse?

**Billy:** his wife

**Teacher:** she curses his wife and?

**Billy:** his family – baby

**Teacher:** his child, yeah, she says that the child's going to be, she cursing the child,

**Billy:** she says she'll make it be born early, so that it's deformed

**Teacher:** yeah, she says the mother will take fright when she sees it, so she's cursing Richard and the wife that he's going to marry, which is interesting, because who's he planning to marry?

(1 December 2005)

Billy's eagerness to offer answers to Monica's questions, like his vocal enthusiasm for role play in the earlier lesson, is entirely characteristic. Other students sometimes make more considered contributions, but Billy can be relied upon to keep the conversation going. Because of this, he has an important effect on the dynamic of the classroom, on the learning that happens in the group. But what should not be overlooked is the evidence that his responses provide for his understanding of the speech that Jenny has just read. There is a pause after Monica's last question; once again, it is Billy who responds, though what he has to say does not at first glance seem to be an answer:

[41:11]

**Billy:** Shakespeare, Shakespeare's a good writer, isn't he?

**Teacher:** he is good [laughs, then pauses] tell me why you think that?

**Billy:** because his play's awesome

**Teacher:** awesome [pause]

**Teacher:** when Anne says, 'If ever he have a wife', why does she put it like that?

**Billy:** {because she might be his wife

**Kemi:** {because he's bare butters

**Billy:** because he's ugly, ugly {deformity

**Teacher:** {so what does she think?

**Foyzur:** nobody's ever going to marry him

**Teacher:** nobody's ever going to marry him – she curses his wife if he ever has one but he never will because he's so ugly ... why's that significant in terms of what's about to happen?

**Kemi:** because she falls in love with his personality

**Teacher:** yeah ...

**Kemi:** even though the personality's butters as well

**Teacher:** yeah

**Billy:** butters, man

**Teacher:** excellent, OK

(1 December 2005)

Billy is, I think, in a fairly self-conscious way, playing the role of the good student here. He offers a scholarly translation of Kemi's description of Richard's appearance – so 'bare butters' is glossed by him first as 'ugly', then as 'deformity.' (Kemi, as I have indicated in earlier chapters, is the class's conspicuous high achiever: her use of urban slang is equally self-conscious, her way of asserting a 'street' identity at the same time as demonstrating her grasp of the play. One can see, too, in this exchange, how Kemi and Billy are both competing for the floor, for the right to speak, at the same time as supporting – and supplementing – each other's reading of the play.) But Billy's appraisal of Shakespeare as a good writer is not just part of his act; it is a touchingly direct, honest – and thoughtful – response to *Richard III*. It is also a deep answer to Monica's question, which, though ostensibly about Richard's intention to marry Anne, is encouraging her students to think about the construction of the scene, to consider how Shakespeare heightens the drama of the confrontation between Anne and Richard.

If we consider Billy's contributions to this lesson in the light of the National Curriculum attainment target for reading, quoted above, we might conclude that Billy 'show[s] understanding of the ways in which meaning and information are conveyed' in the play, and that he can 'articulate personal and

critical responses' to it, 'showing awareness of [some of its] thematic, structural and linguistic features' (DfEE 1999c: 5).

The case of Billy poses a problem that is linked to the point raised at the end of the preceding chapter. The dominance of the assessment regime reinforces the assumption that learning, like reading, happens in the individual, the test subject. Is it, then, that Billy is able to achieve these things in the context of the activity, the literacy practices, of the English classroom? Or is it that these things are achieved by the class, in activities to which Billy has contributed? And what would be the consequences for our thinking about assessment if we were able to conceptualise learning as a fully social, distributed activity?

## **Chapter 12**

### **Conclusion**

My introduction (chapter one, above), presented my main research question and four subsidiary questions:

#### **How are literary texts read in secondary English classrooms in an urban school?**

1. How does such reading relate to, or conflict with, the dominant, policy-approved paradigm of reading?
2. How can such reading be described and theorised?
3. What pedagogy is implicated in these reading practices?
4. What kinds of learning are accomplished in and through engagement with literary texts in these classrooms?

Throughout this thesis, there has been an insistence on the value of a fully social model of the reading that takes place in the classroom. The description and theorisation of what was accomplished in Monica's and Neville's English lessons provide a challenge to dominant paradigms of reading and of pedagogy. The preceding chapters offer a version of English that does not sit easily with Buckingham and Sefton-Green's binary opposition between attitudes to textual work in English and Media Studies:

Despite the current emphasis on the 'sense of audience' in English, and despite the growing influence of 'reader response' approaches ... both the reader and the writer are typically perceived as isolated individuals. Reading and writing are abstracted from the social contexts in which they are performed and placed in a supposedly 'pure' personal space. By contrast, Media Studies goes beyond the

individual student's own behaviour and responses to consider the different ways in which specific social audiences use and make sense of texts. If English is concerned with the individual reader's personal response to the individual writer's personal vision, Media Studies is concerned with the *social production of meaning*, both on the part of audiences and on the part of media institutions.

(Buckingham and Sefton-Green 1994: 134)

In Wharfside, in the lessons that I observed, English was consistently and powerfully concerned with the 'social production of meaning.' This is what we have seen, even – or perhaps especially – in those chapters that have maintained a focus on the contributions of individual students – Foyzur (chapter 9), Jo and Paul (chapter 10), and Billy (chapter 11).

This emphasis on the centrality of the social, on the dialogic and collaborative production and contestation of meaning, poses questions about the National Curriculum's model of progression in reading competence as largely a matter of increasing degrees of independence (see above, chapter 3.1). The ways of reading literary texts that I have tried to describe in chapters 5 to 11 also stand in an uneasy relation to the assumptions about literacy and the reading of literature that are implicated in the regimes of assessment whereby secondary students' reading is measured and credentialised. This tension is the dominant concern in chapter 11; it is also explored in chapter 7, where it is manifested in Darren's rejection of the teacher's presentation of *A View from the Bridge*. If Neville's reading is informed by and mindful of the specifications of the examination syllabus, Darren draws on his sense of social class as he begins to articulate a different reading of the text and a different reading position.

### 12.1 The role of play – and students' agency

In chapter 2, I spent some time examining the different constructions that have been put on Vygotsky's zone of proximal development. I drew attention to Daniels' (2001) suggestion of 'the possibility of a dialectical conception of interaction within the ZPD', which I contrasted with the more limited dyadic version, increasingly associated in this country with a version of 'scaffolding' and hence with teacher-initiated interventions in the learning of individual students. In 'The Problem of Play in Development,' an essay that was included as chapter 7 of *Mind in Society* (1978), Vygotsky returns to the idea of the zone proximal development; this time, though, the idea appears in a context that does not seem to have much to do with questions of assessment or instruction. Instead, it appears in a remarkable passage where Vygotsky argues for play as a centrally important contributor to development:

.. play creates a zone of proximal development of the child. In play a child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behaviour; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself. As in the focus of a magnifying glass, play contains all developmental tendencies in a condensed form and is itself a major source of development.

(Vygotsky 1978: 102)<sup>1</sup>

Throughout this thesis, I have been making the case for taking seriously the work that school students do; threaded through this argument, though, particularly in the analysis of the data from classroom observation, is an argument for the productive potential of students' play. I referred in chapter 1 to my earlier exploration of the value of writing in role, in relation to Hong

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<sup>1</sup> Vygotsky is addressing the development of much younger (pre-school) children here, but what he has to say about the role of play seems to me to be applicable to the students at Wharfside.

Hai's reading of *The Merchant of Venice* (Yandell 1997a). The empirical data that have been presented in this thesis are rich in examples of students making similarly productive use of role play: the scenarii from *Julius Caesar* described in chapter 5; the improvisations around *Richard III* that form an important element in the account presented in chapters 8 and 11; Billy's writing in role in chapter 11; and the work that Neville's students did in imagining contexts for 'excuse me' as preparation for their reading of John Agard (chapter 6).

Monica has a clear rationale for the use of role-play in the classroom – a rationale that suggests that play and pedagogy are much more closely aligned than they might at first sight appear to be:<sup>2</sup>

Why do I do role-play? Partly I suppose because I think that it helps to access abstract concepts. It gives pupils the opportunity to explore ideas, characters and concepts; to put themselves into a story and make it into something that makes sense to them. It allows them to bring their own world knowledge, their own context to that story whether it is historical or fictional. I think that it is difficult to explain anything without narrative and the role-play lets the pupils bring their own narratives into their learning. It shifts the power from the teacher to the pupil and invites them to work with peers to construct their own interpretations.

The process is as important as the finished piece for in the course of preparing a role play they are talking, offering ideas, revising, contesting, incorporating, justifying, accepting. ... In presenting they are throwing their interpretation into the ring to be picked up and developed by others sometimes in subsequent presentations, sometimes in class discussion, sometimes in writing. This process of course happens in other collaborative activities, in exploring text or images, but in these activities the teacher usually gives the resources and the talk (and hence the outcome) can be more restricted.

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<sup>2</sup> An earlier version of the following discussion of Monica's use of role play appeared in Turvey and Yandell (2011: 164-65).

[MB to JY, 8 May 2008]

Empathetic engagement in lives and worlds different from the students' own is seen by Monica as an important part of the work of the classroom.

Students are engaging with texts by drawing on their resources of culture and history, the 'funds of knowledge' (Moll 1994, 2000; Gonzalez *et al.* 2005) that they bring with them to the classroom.

This active and collaborative engagement is, simultaneously, serious and playful. Its relationship to the text is highly variable: sometimes, students incorporate lines, present recognisably Shakespearean characters; at other times, the activity will involve the exploration of a scenario, the relationship of which to the play that they are studying only becoming apparent in a subsequent lesson. Such work extends over time, and the effects are often not immediately discernible. Monica's emphasis on process rather than product, and on the unpredictability of the uses to which such interactions will subsequently be put, does not conform to the current fashion for measurable outcomes. Textual meaning is construed as irreducibly intertextual and social, arising out of the readers' experience of other texts, other subjectivities, other histories. Textual appreciation – the aesthetic dimension of the experience of Shakespeare – tends to emerge less from any obvious focus on language or form than, almost tangentially, from the juxtaposition of different versions, different performances, different texts.

Something else has occurred to me as I have reviewed the video footage of Monica's lessons. Even when her students are not engaged in improvisation



as a discrete activity, her classroom seems to be an arena of serious play. As students offer interpretations and evaluations of the text, they inhabit ever so slightly exaggerated scholarly roles, not quite parodic yet not quite their everyday selves. In the literature classroom, the play really is (and is not) the thing.

Role-play in Monica's classroom needs to be seen through a Vygotskian lens. The relationship between cognitive development and semiotic activity is a complicated one: work in all semiotic modes, including language, enables the development of thought, gives learners access to resources beyond their immediate experience (Barrs 1987). Over time, signs are remade, filled with increasingly dense, rich meanings. In the process, a dialectical relationship is established between 'scientific' and 'spontaneous' concepts (Vygotsky 1987 and chapter 2, above): the everyday knowledge that students bring with them has the capacity to transform and reorganise the curricularised, canonical knowledge of schooling.

This is central, in my view, to an understanding of the work that is done in these classrooms. When Foyzur or Billy, for example, adopt a self-consciously 'academic' voice or position, as we have seen them doing in the lessons described in chapters 9 and 11, this is not just playing at being an intellectual; it is (playfully) claiming real expertise. When, in Neville's Year 10 class, Darren challenges the class basis of Alfieri's choric role in *A View from the Bridge* (chapter 7, above), this is not some watered-down, encapsulated version of literary criticism: this is a reading that demands to be taken

seriously. At the same time, what is being investigated is not simply Miller's text but the students' own class positioning and the social relations of the classroom. There is, in all these moments, a dialectical relationship between disciplinary and everyday knowledge: this dialectic is transformative, both of the participants (this is what learning looks like) and of the subject (this is what English becomes).

The starting-point for this view of reading in the classroom might, broadly speaking, be construed as within a tradition of reader-response theory (as outlined above in chapter 3.5); but what I am proposing is something more radical, more unsettling. My argument is that interpretive communities (Fish 1980) belong, and are constituted, not merely in the academy but in urban English classrooms. These are places where, as Kress *et al.* have argued, English is remade, daily. But it is not only 'English teachers [who] actively construct their subject day by day, *differently*, in the settings of the different classrooms' (Kress *et al.* 2005: 117; quoted in chapter 5, above); this work is also accomplished, differently, by school students, in dialogue with each other as well as with the teacher and with the texts that they read together. What I would therefore want to suggest is that my thesis is making a theoretical contribution in its exploration of how students act as sign-makers, not merely as sign-users (see chapter 2, above), in their reading of literary texts.

## 12.2 The value of re-reading

I started by acknowledging that the category of literature was a contentious one. Literature, in this account, is valuable precisely as a site of contestation, a site where new cultures and new meanings are produced. In the account that I offer of the Wharfside students' encounters with *Julius Caesar* and *Richard III*, with *A View from the Bridge* and with twentieth-century poetry, what is salient is not the transmission of a cultural heritage, nor even of a handful of valorised texts, but the work that the students, with their teachers, have done.<sup>3</sup>

What should, I hope, have become clear in the preceding chapters is that the literacy practices of the classrooms I have been observing have much more in common with those of Shirley Brice Heath's Trackton than with those represented by the image of Jane Eyre with which I started. My argument is that the reading of literature that goes on in such classrooms is irreducibly social, collaborative, dialogic, and that these characteristics mean that it stands in tension with the dominant, policy-endorsed paradigm of reading.

What I also want to suggest is that the practice that is evident in Monica's and Neville's classrooms is powerfully productive. It is productive of new meanings and of meaningful ways of reading the texts that students engage with; these meanings are produced in history and in culture, by students who

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<sup>3</sup> The fact that the majority of the lessons that I observed in Wharfside were devoted to the exploration of plays was, to some extent, an accident of timing. Had I been able to observe at different moments during the school year, I would have seen Monica's Year 9 class reading *Stone Cold* (Swindells 1997) or Neville's Year 10 class reading *Of Mice and Men* (Steinbeck 1937/2000). But the prominence of Shakespeare in my data is also a fairly accurate reflection of the prominence of Shakespeare in the secondary English curriculum. In any case, I would want to suggest that my argument about how literature is read in these classrooms is not dependent on the characteristics of particular literary genres.

draw on extensive repertoires of knowledge and experience, both of the world and of other texts.

Part of my argument, also, is that the forms of pedagogy represented in Monica and Neville's practice are significant – are worth attending to – precisely because of their concern to make space for, and to attend carefully to, the meanings that their students make of the texts that are studied in their classrooms. An anecdote illustrates that these qualities are not universal attributes. When I gave Monica a draft of this thesis to read, she remembered a conversation she had had with another teacher who had joined the English department at Wharfside at the same time as Neville. Monica had been telling about her experiences of reading 'The Lady of Shalott' with 8P (the class with whom I observed her), experiences that Monica recalls in Turvey *et al.* (2006). When Monica told about Mutib's reading of an image of the Lady of Shalott as a woman in purdah, her colleague's reaction was, 'But that's wrong – that isn't what the image represents.' Behind this response lies a very different pedagogy, a very different assessment of school students and the work that they do: it is a pedagogy that is more attuned to the discourse of cultural transmission than to a view of school students as culturally active, as meaning-makers.

This anecdote notwithstanding, my argument is not that such productivity only happens in classrooms where the teacher is responsive to the meanings that students make. Not at all. As I sit in classrooms observing my PGCE students, I never fail to be struck by school students' capacity to make sense

of things (and texts) in their own terms, to bring their funds of knowledge to bear. The difference is not whether this activity goes on or not; it is the extent to which it becomes incorporated into a shared script, a collaborative making of meaning. So I would want to suggest that these forms of activity are present in all classrooms, and are worth attending to.

This leads into a methodological point. In chapters 5-11, the readings of data, the data of classroom observation and of school students' work in different modes and media, are my readings, my interpretations of particular moments, particular interactions. The selection of these moments is not, of course, arbitrary: it reflects my interests. And I am conscious that there were many other moments, in these and other lessons that I observed and filmed, equally worthy of analysis, equally revelatory of students' engagement. The claim that I am making, therefore, is that the moments on which I have focused attention are representative of what went on in the classrooms where Neville and Monica taught. The analyses of these moments that I have offered are readings, situated in history and culture – in *my* history and culture: they are a product of my positioning as a teacher and a teacher educator and of my experience of working in inner London schools over the past three decades. Like all readings, they are motivated, reflecting my interests and my beliefs. To recognise this, however, is not to suggest that these readings have interest or validity only for me. Part of my argument is that close and interested observation is necessary if we are to gain a sense of what is going on in literature classrooms: it is an argument for attending to the significance (the sign-making) of the everyday, to borrow the contested

term from Gavin and Matthew in Neville's Year 10 class. It is an attempt to take seriously, in the context of contemporary urban classrooms, the ordinariness of culture (Williams 1958) and the cultural productivity of ordinary school students.

This reading – my reading – is, like the students' reading of the texts that they share, both intertextual and recursive. It is informed by my readings of other classrooms, other students, as much as it is by my reading of other texts – of theory (Vološinov, Bakhtin, Vygotsky and so on) and of literature (including those texts that the students read). Such reading tends to be recursive, to involve a process of re-reading. In chapter 4, my disagreement with Doecke *et al.* (2007) was, *inter alia*, an argument for the value of re-reading, and hence for the benefits of digital video data. But equally formative, for me, has been the re-reading of theory and of literature, where each re-reading is the production of a different text, produced in different circumstances by a 'me' who is not quite the same as earlier versions: Vygotsky, just as much as *A View from the Bridge*, carries different meanings for me now than when I started haunting the classrooms in Wharfside School (and I am not the same I that I was then).

My argument, therefore, is an argument about how literature is read, or can be read, in secondary urban English classrooms. It is an argument for forms of pedagogy that allow room for playing with texts and with identities. It is an argument for taking seriously the learning that happens in such contexts and such activities. And it is an argument for ways of reading, and re-reading,

classrooms and the work that is done in them, an argument for reading that remains attentive to the specificity and complexity, to the magnificent ordinariness of classrooms in which culture is continually being remade.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1

18 October 2005

#### To the students in 9P

Dear Student,

I am writing to you to explain a little about the research that I am doing, so that you know why I will be spending time in your English lessons this term.

First, I should say something about myself. I have worked for twenty years as an English teacher in London schools. Now I work at the Institute of Education, where I train English teachers. So I am very interested in what happens in English classrooms and I have spent a long time working in them and watching other people teaching and learning in them.

The research that I am now doing is about the kind of reading that goes on in secondary English classes like yours. I am particularly interested in the ways in which school students read texts together, and about the different activities that are involved in this kind of reading. So I am interested in all the ways in which you make sense of the texts that you read together in your English lessons – in the talking and writing that you do about the texts, as well as the moments when you are actually looking at words on a page or screen. And I am interested in the things that your teachers do to help you to make sense of the text.

A lot of what I will be doing is just watching what happens, and making notes. I would also like to record some of what happens in your English lessons – by taking photos, by filming parts of the lesson and by making sound recordings. All of these records are intended just for my research. They will help me to notice things that otherwise I would have missed, and they will remind me of things that I would otherwise forget.

I will be interviewing Ms Brady to find out more about the things she does as your English teacher. I would also like to interview some of you about your lessons and the work that you have done. This will help me to learn more about what has gone on and more about you as learners. Once again, these interviews are just for my research – not for any other purpose.

When I write about what I have found out, I will not use any of your names and I will not use the name of your school. This is to make sure that your right to privacy is respected.

If you have any questions about my research, I would be happy to answer them. When I have finished observing your lessons, I would like to tell you a little about what I think I have found out.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for taking part in my research.

John Yandell



## Appendix 2

15 November 2005

### To the students in 10.6

Dear Student,

I am writing to you to explain a little about the research that I am doing, so that you know why I will be spending time in your English lessons this term.

First, I should say something about myself. I have worked for twenty years as an English teacher in London schools. Now I work at the Institute of Education, where I train English teachers. So I am very interested in what happens in English classrooms and I have spent a long time working in them and watching other people teaching and learning in them.

The research that I am now doing is about the kind of reading that goes on in secondary English classes like yours. I am particularly interested in the ways in which school students read texts together, and about the different activities that are involved in this kind of reading. So I am interested in all the ways in which you make sense of the texts that you read together in your English lessons – in the talking and writing that you do about the texts, as well as the moments when you are actually looking at words on a page or screen. And I am interested in the things that your teachers do to help you to make sense of the text.

A lot of what I will be doing is just watching what happens, and making notes. I would also like to record some of what happens in your English lessons – by taking photos, by filming parts of the lesson and by making sound recordings. All of these records are intended just for my research. They will help me to notice things that otherwise I would have missed, and they will remind me of things that I would otherwise forget.

I will be interviewing Mr Gomes to find out more about the things he does as your English teacher. I would also like to interview some of you about your lessons and the work that you have done. This will help me to learn more about what has gone on and more about you as learners. Once again, these interviews are just for my research – not for any other purpose.

When I write about what I have found out, I will not use any of your names and I will not use the name of your school. This is to make sure that your right to privacy is respected.

If you have any questions about my research, I would be happy to answer them. When I have finished observing your lessons, I would like to tell you a little about what I think I have found out.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for taking part in my research.

John Yandell